# SOMEWHERE DOWN THE CRAZY RIVER

## Journeys in Search of Giant Fish

The story of the rediscovery of the Indian mahseer

and the goliath tigerfish of the Congo

PAUL BOOTE

JEREMY WADE

SANGHA BOOKS

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To Gordon Edwards
without whom it wouldn't have happened
and John and Eileen Wade, with love

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## A note on units

Despite these metric times, anglers worldwide continue to speak the language of pounds and ounces, feet and yards, a state of affairs that shows little sign of changing. For this reason (rather than any innate conservatism on the part of the authors) imperial weights and measures are used throughout, except where context dictates otherwise.

# Contents


1. Beginnings 9
2. Total Immersion 17

BOOK ONE: MAHSEER

3. Discovery 23
4. Initiation 32
5. A Lost Domain 45
6. Ramganga Days 59
7. Shadow across the Sun 66
8. A Season in the South 89
9. Pilgrims 107
10. The Watershed 134

BOOK TWO: GOLIATH

11. The Horror 155
12. Step in the Dark 165
13. A Region of the Mind 184
14. With the Current 228
15. Strange Fever 254
16. Reluctant Return 258
17. Into the Lair 282

Afterword 320

**Chapter One**

# Beginnings

Paul Boote

> By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man, who holds one spellbound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea.
>
> Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908)

> What you get out of fishing is infinitely more than fish. For that reason I believe that neither size nor numbers should matter much; fishing should be the exercise of your skill — and its reward the spots it brings you to.
>
> Negley Farson, *Going Fishing* (1942)

It began innocently enough. I was four and a half years of age and had a passion for books. I remember a picture-colouring book, a paint-splashed table and an attentive mother hovering ready with cleaning cloth and paper towels. The usual houses, hills, trees and skies were quickly daubed in imaginative, garish tones — a minute to the page; the images bored me. But one page arrested my attention. It was a line drawing of a small boy and girl, fishing. The boy held a fishing rod, the girl a net. Before them, on the as yet uncoloured water, bobbed a large round float. Behind them, on the bank, stood a jamjar full of tiddlers. Neither my mother nor I can remember my exact words at that moment, but they were to the effect that I wanted a fishing rod; I had to try what that boy was doing in the picture.

The years that followed were to change my parents' lives as much they did mine. My father, who had no interest in fishing, was soon deputed to take me to the nearby River Thames at Windsor, hold the heavy bamboo rod as I instructed him, strike on command, and generally prevent me from drowning myself whilst I pursued my new-found passion. By the age of five I was doing the work myself and catching the first bleak, roach, dace, ruffe and splendid stripey perch from a willow-hung river-garden at Datchet, as my parents whiled away a summer's afternoon in deckchairs with their friends, the garden's owners. *Dotty*, a tiny, 1930s-vintage, wooden cabin-cruiser complete with reeking Seagull engine, became a family treasure when I was six. She took us up and down the Thames to Maidenhead, Cookham, Marlow and Hurley. My parents were fishing by this time; we had become a three-rod family. Our family mythology still includes the afternoon my mother struck a five-inch dace clear of the water and into the branches of an overhanging willow. She claims, to this day, that

the fish then fell off the hook and onto the riverside lawn, where their friends' opportunist cat pounced and absconded with it into the rose border. I remember otherwise. The dace in question fell safely into the river, the cat incident occurring some years later, to me, beside the River Kennet.

The situation grew worse. The annual summer holiday in Bournemouth was next to suffer. Rods were taken and the Throop Fishery on the Dorset Stour discovered. One glimpse of that then lovely river was enough: the beaches of Boscombe and Sandbanks were forgotten; bucket and spade, at a stroke, made redundant. We spent long sunny days beside the sparsely attended fishery, occasionally catching fish of a size and quality undreamed of in the Thames. And, what was more, I could actually *see* the fish I was trying to catch. The golden gravel runs and lush beds of ranunculus trailing in the transparent waters, revealed — no, flaunted their bounty. The fascination of the mystery of water, and of all things that live in or beside it, was born in me at this time; and now, more than thirty years later, it still shows no sign of going away.

One August afternoon beside the Stour, as I made a mixed shoal of roach and dace fairly boil below the rod-tip by throwing them regular handfuls of maggots, a big boy — all of twelve — appeared on the bank beside me. His Dorset burr, an accent alien to one accustomed only to vowel-murdering west London, and a somewhat terse, businesslike manner made me immediately aware that here was a person who knew what he was about. He stared intently into the water a few feet downstream from my expectant roach and dace. A couple of minutes passed as I watched him crouch, motionless, behind a bankside screen of trimmed nettles. Then he backed away from the river, and, walking straight past me towards a battered bicycle, simply said, 'Catch a minnow, will you.'

'Why?' I asked, squeakily.

'You'll see — just get un.'

I did as I was told. A minnow was taken from the margins with a single maggot on a tiny hook. The boy took the minnow from me, flicked it on the head with a stubby second finger and impaled the now dead creature on an enormous, thick-wired hook; a ha'penny (rather than a penny) purchase from the tackle shop, if ever I had seen one. He crawled over to the nettle screen, looked across at me and raised a finger to his lips in warning, then whispered, 'Don't move, and look out for Ernie the bailiff!'

This seven-year-old quaked. I knew and liked Mr Leah, who always had a nice smile for my mother and me. I sensed imminent dishonour and banishment from the fishery. The local boy lowered the weighted minnow, dropped the rod and, in almost the same instant, struck. Something buttercup-yellow flung itself violently from the water. It never regained the element; the rod threw it into the bushes behind with the authority of a crane jib. The boy swore and pounced on the fish, bludgeoned it with a piece of flint and looked up at me, his face flushed in triumph. So ended my introduction to trout fishing....

The following May I caught my first trout (and grayling), on worm, from the River Avon in the shadow of Salisbury Cathedral spire. The next day saw me again beside the river, with my coarse tackle, a borrowed fly rod and an adoring admirer, Emma, the eight-year-old daughter of the rod's owner. Mr Cory had seen the ease with which I had extracted some of his trout the previous day and felt that I should now do the done thing and try a fly. 'Red Tags for the grayling. Iron Blue for the trout,' he had said as he saw us off at the door.

I was in my element: a full day's fishing in prospect in the company of a pretty girl. (I was never one for playing at being men with the boys.) A gale blew, driving dark ragged-edged clouds across a sodden sky. The surface of the river raced upstream in wind-blown waves. I flogged it with the fly rod, trying to emulate what I had seen a fisherman do so effortlessly on the opposite bank the previous day. The heavy cane rod was too much for a small boy and soon I was exhausted. Emma, a woman even then, unimpressed by my efforts, demanded that I catch a fish. Obediently, I took up the bait rod. Half an hour passed and the fish showed no eagerness for worm. Bored, Emma set off for home. I fished on, through a drenching shower and into a period of bright remission before the next squall.

Then the flies appeared. A dozen or so at first, their numbers swelling quite literally to hundreds with eye-blink rapidity in just a few minutes: small, inky blue-black, sail-winged dots upon the metallic sheen and chop of the river's surface. A fish splashed messily after one, then another and another, until the water for twenty yards about me was cut with frantically feeding fish. I had never seen anything like it, so watched in detached bewilderment for a good five minutes before it occurred to try for them. Worm refused, I grabbed the fly rod, oiled Mr Cory's Iron Blue and flicked it the few feet required to a rise. There was a rapid boil, I lifted and immediately a fish was twisting as it backed off down the current. My first grayling — all of half a pound. I recast a few minutes later. A slower rise to the starling-winged artificial, a leap, and a heart-stopping minute or two later a trout of over a pound came to the bank. Three more grayling followed. The rises were in midstream now and, poor tiring caster that I was, I could no longer reach them. Inspiration came. I threw myself upon the bait rod, bit off the float tackle and tied on the other Iron Blue. The wind, gusting from behind my back, raced upstream, stripping the gossamer-like nylon off the reel, carrying the fly some distance across the water. I missed rise after rise, then landed a small grayling. A 1½-pound trout almost pulled me in soon after, but I eventually got him.

As suddenly as they had appeared, the flies were gone; the hatch and rise of fish ended as if a switch had been thrown. I was left on the bank with seven fish; heart racing, hands shaking, stunned by the frantic activity. I will never forget the events of that day, for it remains the best hatch of *Baetis pumilus*, the iron blue, I have seen in half a lifetime's fishing. I very much doubt that the Hampshire Avon could produce its equal today.

Both game and coarse fishing exercised a fascination over me during the coming

years and, without a Mr Cory or other serious angler-mentor to cultivate a particular prejudice in a young impressionable mind, I enjoyed them equally. Besides, by pursuing both, I could fish the year round. I was not entirely untutored however....

There was W.J. (Bill) Longman of Longman's Fishing Tackle, 258 Barrack Road, Christchurch, Hants. (I remember the address even now.) Mr Longman, for some reason (he was a fairly gruff sort), took a shine to me when Dad and I first went into his shop. I must have been six or seven. He sold us day tickets for Throop, sixpence worth of maggots and some very superior Allcock's Model Perfect hooks-to-nylon, then offered us advice on where to fish. We visited him almost daily in the nine or ten summer holidays that followed. Mr Longman often talked of the great salmon that swam the nearby Avon and Stour; clearly, these fish were his special love. I will never forget the rainy afternoon on which he showed us his salmon tackle.

There were three Hardy LRH spinning rods and a single Wanless model; a glittering silver Elarex multiplying reel; a shining red, twin-handled Ambassadeur, smelling of oil and leather like an old MG sports car; and an Altex fixed-spool. ('Better than the foreign rubbish!' he confided to Dad, about the latter.) And the line: the reels, with the exception of the Altex, were loaded with braided terylene line — Milward's Black Spider. (It appeared that stretchy monofilament should not be used for the king of fish — particularly in springtime.) Best of all were the boxes of lures: devon minnows in rubber, metal and wood; and the plugs — oh Lord, the plugs! — River Runt Spook floaters in three sizes and four different colours, and the wooden Pal-o-Mine patterns by Pfleuger of America. (He also had one of the same company's multiplier reels, named the Supreme. It was just that.) The Wye leads, ball-bearing swivels, prawn and minnow mounts were stored in another box. Then there was the telescopic gaff, a barbaric hook used for lifting out a tired thirty-pounder at the end of a long fight. Whilst being shown these treasures, I twice had to ask to be excused so I could visit the little room that lay at the back of the shop.

I never fished with Bill Longman. He never offered to take me out after salmon, and I did not dare to ask. But we did correspond for several years. From the age of eleven I wrote letters full of salmon fishing questions to his Barrack Road address, and he answered them with advice and diagrams of how to fish an Avon salmon lie, deep and slow. I still have the selection of minnows he sent me one Christmas. I daresay that Dad had forwarded him a cheque, but I learned greatly from his letters nevertheless. Later, I met other Avon salmon aficionados — Doc Swain, Danny Richmond, Tom Williams — men whose every move on the riverbank I watched and noted, until, one day, it was my turn to have a go. My long apprenticeship was quickly rewarded.

In another summer, whilst staying in Bournemouth, we took a drive up the Stour Valley to the small town of Wimborne. As I hung over the bridge that crosses the little River Allen in the town, my father read out to me what our 1963 edition of *Where to Fish* had to say about the fishing. The Allen, it seemed, was closely

preserved for trout, but there was fishing to be had on the nearby Stour. We found our way to an ironmonger's shop close by, which was said to offer day tickets. Once there, Dad splashed out on a ticket for the following day, and then asked the proprietor a few questions. We left the shop a while later with the name and address of a local angler written on the back of a receipt slip. (I still have the slip, somewhere — perhaps between the pages of an *Angling Times* booklet of the period, *The Dorset Stour*; a lot of my books are stored away in boxes at the time of writing.) The name written on the slip was 'O. Wentworth'. We went to see Mr Wentworth the following day. We discovered that he was a postman, and something of a local expert. He took me fishing late that same afternoon. Two further trips on the Stour, with the renowned roach-fisher, Owen Wentworth of Wimborne, taught me more about fishing a river than I could have learned for myself in several years of unguided experimentation.

Every angler holds fond memories of similar formative experiences, regardless of whether the initial approach to fishing was made at four years of age or forty. I could go on to list the first barbel and the best bag of tench as highlights of the years that followed, without alluding to the other significant influence, aside from the catching of fish, that angling was having upon me: a fundamental love of the waterside, of the wild, lonely places it took me to, of the inner calm of solitude; and, subliminally, an appreciation and understanding of the links between the closely circumscribed world of Man and that of largely forgotten Nature.

(Of course, many angling writers — in addition to writing about fish and how to catch them — lace their work with accounts of splendid dawns and encounters with animals during days at the waterside. If the writer's ability with the rod happens to exceed his talent with a pen, then anglers may receive the work favourably. If it does not, anglers — stern critics — are tempted to conclude that peripheral interests, such as birds in berried hedgerows, were introduced merely in order to compensate for the writer's inability to say any new about fishing. There is a reason for such harsh judgement: angling remains first and foremost about seeking and catching fish. Indeed, most anglers would admit to *lusting* after fish — dip into any work of angling literature, and evidence will be found to support this claim. Fish: we dream of them swaying, tantalizingly visible in rivers of pristine clarity; enumerate their spots, or stripes, or scales in the flickering water-light; watch them dart and tilt at items in the sinuous flow; they are an unending source of fascination, mystery and delight, but, like a beautiful woman, they can bring out the best and the worst in a man.)

As my experience had grown, then, I had become aware that something more than the mere hooking and landing of fish was keeping me going fishing. I found that the places fishing took me to were an equally powerful stimulus. The kind, helpful people I met at the water's edge were another. I remember an article, written by Bernard Venables, published in the wonderful *Creel* magazine in 1963. The piece had a far greater effect upon me then, at the age of ten, than did anything by Enid

Blyton or Rider Haggard, my other reading matter of the period. In the article, Venables (who, I have since learned, shares my birthday — Aquarians both) wrote of why he chose to fish against fish and not against men. He deplored, if memory serves, the growing trend of man fishing against man, in whatever field of our diverse pastime. His message was clear: set man against man and our 'sport', and our enjoyment of it, will suffer. I did not at the time fully understand his hypothesis — that only came from later experience — but I nevertheless assimilated the substance of it with the intensity of a child learning a new language. I remember my father, a part-time conscript angler but highly literate man, telling me at the time that here was a lesson I should learn. I have striven not to forget it throughout my subsequent angling years.

* * *

A two-year boarding-school sentence, from age eleven to thirteen, almost did for me. I was reduced to making balsa-wood floats and reading Richard Walker's great angling book, *No Need To Lie*, in the brief periods free from the tyranny of Latin grammar. As a consequence, school holidays became orgies of fishing, as I made up for lost time. At thirteen I was sent to another, slightly less secure prison. It was situated near Godalming, in Surrey, less than a mile from the River Wey. This institution could not hold me, and I fished most free afternoons. The chub fishing was very good. My school reports, surprisingly, did not reflect the marked lack of attention I was paying to my studies. For this reason, no alarm bells rang.

By age sixteen, I knew that I did not wish to pursue the career in law my father had planned for me. I wanted to become a Lee Wulff or an A.J. McClane, whose exploits I had read about in fabulous American magazines like *Field and Stream*. No boring office life for me: on leaving school, I would work on a river — breeding salmon, perhaps — and fish when I wanted. The dream came true. A few weeks before my eighteenth birthday, I began work as a trainee keeper at the Avon and Dorset River Authority's hatchery beside the River Avon just below Salisbury. Never had I seen such a fine mixed fishery, full of great salmon, trout and coarse fish, and nor have I since.

The following year, 1972, with fifteen years of hard-core angling experience behind me, I did something which threw my family into despair. In the spring, I left London for West Wales, where I intended to settle and lead a true fisher's life. Salmon, sea trout, mullet and bass then abounded in this region's rivers and estuaries, and I reasoned that I could have a wonderful time here, fishing much and working little. My decision appeared to confirm even the worst predictions of a gloomy aunt, who had always maintained that I was a black sheep and would come to no good. When two parents asked their hot-headed nineteen-year-old why he was going, he found he could give them no reasonable answer. Now, I think he could.

He would tell them that he believes there is something of the nomad and of the

hunter in all of us, and that in anglers this atavistic streak is most pronounced. Several thousand years of settlement have failed to eradicate the drive that makes us long for new horizons or creep and crawl around bankside bushes whilst stalking rather less than half a yard of fish. We while away dull moments in a working day, thinking of the secret places to which our leisure hours will take us. However far from the water's edge in time and space we may be, a current swirl, a floating leaf, a flick of tail glimpsed in the mind's eye is enough: we are immediately transported and enslaved by our watery obsession. Even the most domesticated of souls knows the trauma experienced when the desire to fish grips. Home is a trial, domestic chores a torment, life is dust and ashes until you take up a fishing rod. Wales was my answer to this problem.

For over three years I indulged a magnificent obsession. I caught all the salmon, sea trout, mullet and bass I had ever dreamed of: five twenty-pound salmon and a nine-pound bass and a seven-pound mullet on light freshwater tackle. The experience very nearly killed me. Unlimited fishing, the armchair fantasy of so many anglers, I found, ultimately became a term of imprisonment; like an endless diet of fine Swiss chocolate, it soon palled. I discovered then that one needs *not* to go fishing in order to enjoy those times when you do. I returned to London, to pick up the pieces.

A number of lessons had been learned from the Welsh excess. I knew that I could never be content with ordinariness in my fishing again. I would certainly continue to exercise a marked interest in anything wearing fins, but the species of fish, its sporting merits, method of capture and, above all, the location and nature of its home were now of paramount importance. I could no longer fish for oft-caught, tatty creatures from the banks of an urban rubbish dump. Nor could I bring myself to fish the man-made waters that had proliferated throughout southern England in the years I had been away. This knowledge was to have disturbing consequences. After a period of no fishing whatsoever, there followed what many would consider to be a string of fringe activities: an unsuccessful spring in search of a Thames trout; a summer after one potentially record-breaking barbel, with similar result; long days on ill-kempt minor chalkstreams after remnant populations of wild trout; and autumns and winters catching grayling, dace and chub with float tackle and a centrepin reel — all for the joy of it, for doing something as well as you can, for yourself, and not the record books. But, increasingly, I began to feel out of step with my fellow anglers, out in the wilderness. When we talked together, I sometimes doubted we were speaking the same language. I was fished out.

During this period, I discovered and read Edward Hewitt's elegant resumé of a fisherman's progress. Loosely paraphrased, it states that: as beginners we wish to catch lots of fish; as improvers the largest; and as anglers of experience the most difficult ones, the fish which require every refinement of our tackle and skill. At the ripe old age of twenty-two, I could hardly include myself in Hewitt's final category, but, nevertheless, it appeared to offer me a strand of hope.

Some analysis of motives was called for. I asked myself just exactly what I liked about fishing, and what I wanted from it. I knew emphatically what I liked: angling for hard-to-catch, wild fish in remote, uncrowded waters; and meeting the fine, unselfish people who often live beside and fish these waters. But what I wanted now was not just another opportunity to catch a few more, albeit exceptional, fish; I needed the great satisfaction to be gained from first finding, then travelling to, and then living in the splendid country that invariably borders such fishes' habitat. I had previously read somewhere that one of angling's greatest attractions is its diversity; that when a particular field of activity ceased to satisfy, a new one demanding fresh skills and disciplines could be sought; that this continuous learning process, together with the complete unpredictability of the fish themselves, was what kept people fishing; that when fresh challenge banishes the staleness of repetition, mystery will again fire the imagination and enthusiasm be restored....

I had my answer: I must seek a new horizon. I looked, but found no likely candidate. When I had waited rather too long for something to appear and inspire me, with impeccable timing something came along and did just that.

It was to lead me via a circuitous, occasionally difficult route to some astonishing places, some mind-blowing fish, and some very interesting people. One of those people was Jeremy Wade. I leave him to introduce himself.

Chapter Two

# Total Immersion

Jeremy Wade

To stick your hands into the river is to feel the cords that bind the earth together in one piece.
Barry Lopez, *River Notes* (1979)

One of my earliest memories, and it was nearly my last, is of roaring water all around me: breaking waves tumbling me over and over in a never-ending backward somersault. No echo remains of the terror I must have felt on that North Sea shore; just dim recollection of spinning, alone and weightless, through bubbling white space. A stranger's hand reached through the surface and pulled me back into the air.

But the water didn't release me completely. More than three decades later I still feel its grip — a grip more subtle, admittedly, but one no less irresistible. I find myself inexplicably drawn by an almost gravitational pull, and cannot help but focus beyond the surface, on the half-familiar world below. This state of mind is mirrored by a rare physical characteristic: I am negatively buoyant. Unlike most of the human species, whose natural tendency upon immersion is to float, I sink.

So perhaps it was inevitable that I should become an angler. Certainly it was a destiny that sought me out, rather than vice versa, for my early encounters with rod and line couldn't have been less auspicious. On what was, I think, my first ever cast (I was aged about seven), I managed to throw Excalibur into the water before I'd even started: the top section of my four-foot metal rod flew to the other side of the river and was never seen again. (I went back the next day with my mask and flippers, but called off the salvage operation when I lost sensory contact with my feet.) Being of a somewhat serious frame of mind in those days, I reasoned that a hobby that involves standing knee-deep in cold mud in order to throw one's most expensive Christmas present away doesn't have a lot to recommend it. I would stick to my stamp hinges and polystyrene cement.

A year or two later I graduated to a bike gang. One of our number, Simon, lived at the top of a long, gravelly hill, down which we would take turns to race at the highest possible speed, while the others pelted us with clods of earth from the adjacent field. But there was another, more contemplative side to Simon. While most of us village boys went through the pointless ritual, from time to time, of plunking worms and bread, Simon knew the secret (so the rumour went) of actually catching

fish. I can't remember exactly how it happened, but I started tagging along. He lent me a rod and showed me what to do. It was nothing short of alchemy: I lowered beads of lead into water and back came gold.

The place where I held that first flashing shape was the winding River Stour in Suffolk, then a magical Eden of lush green banks, inscrutable black-water weirpools and narrow glides between whispering reedbeds. Over the years that followed I made the acquaintance of many more of its inhabitants. At first there were the ever-obliging gudgeon and pristine, scarlet-epauletted roach. Then, as I found my own secret places over the meadows, I began to experience the raw electricity of three- and four-pound chub and, very occasionally, the sudden, paralysing jolt of a double-figure pike....

Sometimes, in those farther reaches, I would come across a lone figure. Improbable stories circulated amongst the few people in the know about the huge fish that Mr Page, the village cobbler, coaxed from our little river — and most of them were true. Yet his approach was the essence of simplicity, his rough-and-ready gear devoid of all the supposedly essential gimmicks that I used to drool over at the tackle shop in town. Here was food for much thought. But the man remained something of an enigma. When we met on the bank we communicated by gestures; sometimes I visited his workshop and we conversed with chalk on slate. Was it because he was deaf to human speech that he was so well attuned to the ways of fish? If so, it didn't stop me hoping that, one day, I would share his understanding.

Thus I became drawn into angling's intellectual dimension — and the paradox that lies at its heart. For as my knowledge grew, so the mystery now deepened.

To give an example: tench are traditionally believed to hibernate, rendering them uncatchable in winter. It is also a lake fish. None, to my knowledge, had ever been seen in the Stour ... until the one I caught (my first ever, incidentally) on a day blanketed by freezing fog, through a hole in the ice.

Another day a sea trout — as common as Martians in those parts — snapped the worm I was retrieving from the Perch Hole (from which I never caught a perch).

And deeper mysteries still. At the tail of a mill-race I once saw five shadowy forms materialize into chain-mailed wild carp — a species never seen in that place before nor since. (Mr Page took a sixteen-pound mirror carp — a capture that stunned everybody — from the same spot where I caught my tench, but true wild fish were unheard of.) All afternoon my eyes strained as the ghostly squadron crossed and recrossed the threshold of visibility, until I finally managed to flick a hook into their path, concealed in a fragment of floating breadcrust. They were within a few feet of it and slowly tilting towards the surface when they were put down, for good, by a crash-landing swan. Even the smallest of those fish would have meant infinitely more than any of the twenty-pound mirror carp I went on to catch in later years.

Then there was the evening session at the Ants' Nest when my hook three times pulled out of something more impassively powerful than anything I had experienced before. What it was — or what they were — I never found out.

And I never will. Because even as this underwater world was beginning to reveal some of its secrets to me, it was coming to an end. In an effort to avert the occasional flooding of this part of the Stour valley, earth-movers were starting to turn whole stretches of river — including most of my favourite haunts — into featureless canal. The magic was gone.

In an attempt to recapture something of what had been lost, I found myself turning to books. And the stories I found myself returning to again and again where those of giant carp: bull-nosed leviathans shouldering their way through the murky depths, occasionally rising like underwater zeppelins to manifest themselves to the poor souls who fished for them — driving them to the deranged fanaticism of latter-day Captain Ahabs. In my mind's eye, I looked on as Richard Walker hunted the monsters of Redmire Pool, as 'BB' crept round the banks of an eerie flooded quarry....

Driven to turn this fantasy into reality, I discovered some waters within cycling or lift-cadging distance that were rumoured to hold these mythical beasts. In this I was fortunate to be greatly aided and abetted by one of my teachers, Graham Whiting. But my attempts to put a carp on the bank were spectacularly unsuccessful: night after night hunched on an uncomfortable tackle box — sometimes in the foulest rain — with nothing to show for it but aching eyes and a numbed brain. Never had I experienced failure on such an epic scale. Yet I was addicted. Here, surely, lay the ultimate challenge, and — if I should succeed — the ultimate prize.

It wasn't until much later that I grasped that prize, on the overgrown banks of a tiny pool in the Cotswolds: a brown-and-gold mirror carp weighing four and a half pounds, stalked in the shallows and tempted with a piece of breadflake. My long, fishless apprenticeship, on what I later learned were exceptionally difficult waters, had finally paid off. What's more, it appeared that (together with the rainwater in my joints) I had absorbed during those countless lakeside hours an unrealized fund of understanding; for very soon afterwards I took my first carp of over ten pounds, in those days a big fish. It came at night from an archetypal English carp water — lily-fringed, willow-hung, black glassy surface — that lay hidden in a fold of the Suffolk countryside. I can still see that fish now, rolling exhausted onto its side just beyond the arms of my landing net. There was no moon in the sky, but in the water there rose a large reflected crescent.

This capture seemed to open the floodgates, confirming the suspicion that success begins with a state of mind (though not fishing so many carpless waters undoubtedly helped). Several more large fish followed in the next few years, during which time I became, at sixteen, the youngest member of the recently formed British Carp Study Group, a fully paid-up fanatic and proud of it.

Then, one summer in my early twenties, a fact I had been trying to hold down for a long time burst to the front of my mind. The fact was this: the drug had lost its potency.

I subjected myself to rigorous self-analysis, and concluded that it was not I who

had changed (no simple case of tolerance, this) but — the unthinkable — the drug itself.

The process had started with the booming popularity of carp fishing in the seventies. (Those inspirational writers had been working their spell on many others besides me.) People began to appear on once deserted lakesides. This, up to a point, I could live with, even though I am more antisocial than most in my desire for solitude when fishing. But not only did carp angling cease to be an escape from other people; there was a knock-on effect on its whole nature. For example, fish that once could have been hooked under your feet (and what a high-octane experience that can be!) now mostly kept a healthy distance from the bank, forcing the angler into a routine of static long-distance fishing in whatever space was left unclaimed.

In response to rapidly increasing demand, there was then large-scale stocking, particularly with 'instant' big fish. This, combined with the fact that large numbers of anglers were now spending thousands upon thousands of hours staking out waters up and down the country, had the effect (personal opinion again, I must stress) of removing the vital elements of mystery and surprise. To the point where a single walk around some waters chatting to other anglers could give you the inside-leg measurements of all the fish in the lake. Why then bother to fish to find out? It all became too clinical and predictable for my liking: put in so many balls of such-and-such a bait and, if you clock up enough rod-hours, sooner or later you will catch fish *x*, *y* or *z*. I must admit I did my share of such 'formula' fishing, breaking the rules where I could, but it quickly palled.

Finally came the development of high nutritive value baits. Although in itself a triumph of original thought (proving that carp can, in time, unconsciously determine the food value of an identifiable bait), this, too, contributed to the growing artificiality. Abnormal amounts of introduced feed, in the form of multicoloured little balls, became in many cases the most significant part of the carp's diet. To the point where it's possible that more protein, carbohydrate, fat, etc was going into Britain's carp waters as bait than was ever coming out in the form of fish (individuals rather than captures). Examined in the context of the origin of angling — hunting for food — this was a situation ludicrous in the extreme: anybody who had to catch fish to survive who went about it this way would starve.

All this isn't to say that these developments were intrinsically wrong. Seen with the benefit of hindsight, it was the only way things could have gone with a finite quantity of water and a seemingly infinite number of increasingly demanding and ingenious anglers. Merely by being on the water myself, I, too, was part of the process. (And the process goes on: the fish that have been feeding on all those free offerings of designer bait are now reaching sizes they would never have attained otherwise.) And one cannot deny that there has been a positive side: much of the mind-boggling ingenuity of modern carp fishing, particularly innovations in bait presentation, are a direct result of increased angling pressure. Catching carp is still a challenge. But it's not the same. And the fact remains that, for me, the magic

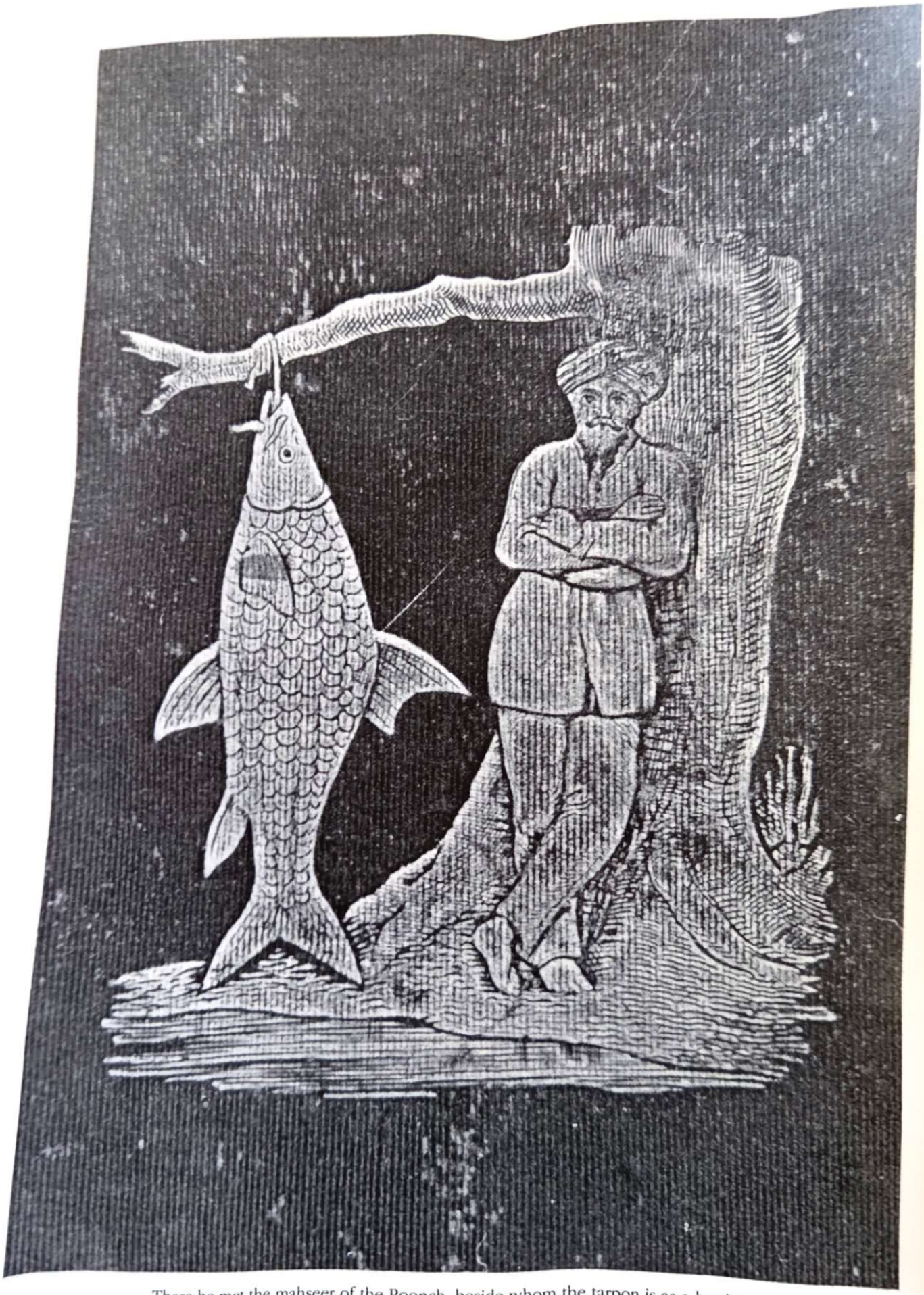
disappeared — as it did for a number of others at around the same time. So I gave up carp fishing. I consoled myself with the knowledge that I had enjoyed, in my earlier days, the tail-end of a Golden Age.

But although I had failed to adapt to changing times, whatever it was that had made me an angler refused to become extinct. Living with the void was equally impossible. My short-term remedy was to pursue a fish as rare and mysterious as the carp had once been: the wels catfish, *Siluris glanis*. At that time very few British anglers had seen, let alone caught, this wide-mouthed, scaleless, betentacled creature of the slime. It certainly wasn't the fashionable species it has become today. But it was a short-lived fling. After catching a goodish number of fish in my first season I moved to the north of England, well away from Britain's few catfish waters, and became — without too many regrets — an ex-angler.

And that's how things might have stayed if I hadn't, some time later, started idly fanning through a pile of old *Angling* magazines at a jumble sale. One of the magazines stopped me absolutely in my tracks. Pictured on the cover was a wild, rocky river and, standing on one of the rocks, a man grimly hanging on to an improbably bent fishing rod, the line from the rod-tip disappearing out of picture horizontally. Inset was a picture of the same man sagging under the weight of a huge bronze-scaled fish.

The author of the accompanying article, as you have probably guessed, was Paul Boote, and the fish was a mahseer. Never a great letter writer, I nevertheless felt compelled to scratch a note to him saying how captivated I had been by his story, even though, as I explained, I was now a non-angler. My letter must have struck some chord because back came a lengthy reply, whose essential message was: *You must go.*

That was how I came to find myself on the banks of the Ramganga River in northern India in 1982. What happened next, and on subsequent visits to rivers around the world — via miscellaneous hospitals and jails — is told in the following chapters.



There he met the mahseer of the Poonch, beside whom the tarpon is as a herring;
and he who lands him can say that he is a fisherman.

Rudyard Kipling, *The Brushwood Boy* (1898)

**Chapter Three**

# Discovery

Paul Boote

> Further up some 14 miles or so, what is called the "Rocks" is reached; here a huge barrier of rocks stretches right across the river, which is broken up into torrential rapids; and all round here splendid fishing is to be had. It was here the record of over 80 pounds was, I believe, caught ... Lieutenant-Colonel Taylor, 30th M.I., and myself, fishing from below the Rocks up to and about the confluence, between the 1st and 21st April, 1903, took 66 fish, weighing a total of 696 lbs., the biggest fish being 45 lbs., second 43 lbs., and third, 35 lbs.; many other large fish were hooked which broke us. I had on one fish for over 5 hours, and had gone between 2 and 3 miles downstream with him, when he got me hung up in a sunken tree in 60 feet deep water, where it was impossible to clear the line, and I was obliged to break; what the weight of this fish was I don't know, but at the end of 5 hours' very hard fighting, with no rests or sulking, he appeared pretty nearly as lively as when first hooked ...
>
> Lieutenant-Colonel H.D. Keary, in *The Angler's Handbook for India, 4th edition* (1905)

My friend the late Gordon Edwards — masterly angler, bon viveur and fascinating, complex character that he was — must be held at least partly responsible for what happened next. I first met him beside the Cenarth Falls on the River Teifi in West Wales — a place of some notoriety then, with its local denizens employing some very coarse methods to hook (I emphasise *hook*) one of the gamest of fish, the salmon. The year was 1972 and I was in phase one of my near-terminal, four-year Welsh fishing marathon. Gordon stood out from the crowd of fishermen like an Arab stallion in a donkey derby. During the course of that April afternoon, I gained invaluable information about fishing in local waters, and an appreciation of the free-running Nottingham centrepin reel as an item worthy of an angler's long-term devotion — and temporarily lost the affections of Ruth, my girlfriend of the time. 'Maggoty' Edwards, as the locals called him (a folk-memory of certain misdemeanours with the sea trout of a nearby small river a decade earlier), was a smooth customer. Despite the forty years that separated us, we at once became firm friends.

The following years saw us fish together on almost two hundred occasions. I was intrigued and fascinated by Gordon's acidic humour and effusive, but ever so brittle charm. In addition to nurturing the individualistic streak already present within me, he taught me how to fish the centrepin reel. He had learned the art from the master himself, F.W.K. Wallis of Nottingham, on the banks of the Hampshire Avon at the Royalty Fishery back in the early 1930s. To watch Gordon perform the Wallis Cast

with a pre-war Allcock Matchfisher's Aerial reel and Hardy Wallis Avon rod, whilst float-fishing for mullet in the estuary, would have stunned the most proficient, dyed-in-the-wool Speycasting salmon fly-fisher. It was pure magic. I wrote an article about the cast for an angling magazine. It was very hard work. 'Better than Wallis's description in *Fine Angling for Coarse Fish*,' Gordon said of the piece, with uncharacteristic charity, 'but still not bloody good enough!'

To consummate the new affair, I began buying centrepin reels dating from the late 1890s to the 1940s. The reels were in their heyday during this period; they had yet to be superseded by the easier-to-use threadline, or fixed-spool, spinning reel. Anticipating the fashion of collecting such items by a year or two, I found that prices were modest to say the least; I bought enough to see me through my remaining angling years.

Old fishing tackle catalogues were the things to consult in one's pursuit of classic reels. Gordon lent me a number of *Hardy's Angler's Guides* from the early '30s. I found that the reading they offered was almost as good as fishing itself. But I think it was a 1931 Farlow that did the damage. There was a particular photograph on one of its yellowing, dog-eared pages. If I had turned that page, or remained content with browsing through the more sumptuous Hardy *Guides*, nothing would have happened; life would have continued as usual. Somewhere in a cosmic amusement arcade, a finger rested gently, hesitantly upon a button. I looked, and looked again. The digit stabbed downwards, and immediately past and present dissolved into a half-remembered blur behind me. The journey had begun.

* * *

The photograph was of an enormous fish suspended from a pole, shouldered at each end by a beturbanned Indian bearer. In front of the fish stood a young woman: a tall, slim, aristocratic-looking creature, elegantly attired in the full skirts of the Edwardian period. In one hand she held the sixteen feet of weighty greenheart with large brass winch, the fishing equipment that quickly wore down even the sternest of men in those days of Empire. The position of her other hand, however, was more telling: it had been arranged to affect a certain air of ease, the unshakable confidence of the memsahib perhaps, haughty mistress of her domain. But she had failed. At that moment in time, recorded beside a river in the distant Himalaya, her nervous, self-conscious pose revealed an endearing, girlish vulnerability. If a man can fall suddenly a little in love, I did then.

The fish itself was equally fascinating. It was nothing less than a huge barbel, not an inch shy of four and a half feet. A caption declared it to be a fifty-six-pound mahseer caught from the River Ganges in northern India, and that Farlow tackle had of course played a part in its downfall. Mahseer — *the mighty mahseer* — I had seen a reference to it in one of the many old books I consumed avidly throughout my childhood. But this leviathan, pictured scale and fin, was staggering. In the text

which followed was an account of a fish that appeared capable of breaking rods, clearing reels of hundreds of yards of line, crushing hooks and resisting an angler's efforts to land it for hours. If the mahseer in reality was only half the animal it was claimed to be on the page, then why didn't we hear about it today?

I telephoned the British Museum of Natural History in South Kensington. It was a place from which my parents and a Wolf Cub pack Akela had had to drag me, kicking and screaming, as a child. The old Hall of Fishes had been the problem. Row upon row of 'stuffed', glass-cased fish were displayed there, and on each visit I lost myself among them, cocooned by the rich glow of mahogany and the resinous tang of furniture polish. For me the museum lost all its magic when the old exhibits were replaced with fibreglass models ranged along the sides of walk-through galleries, sometime in the early 1970s. The Victorians may have exacted a terrible toll upon the earth's wildlife, but they certainly knew how to put on a good show.

I made an appointment to see one of the museum's icthyologists, Dr Gordon Reid. After hearing about my interest in mahseer, he said, 'I am afraid I'm an Africa specialist; no one here really knows that much about Indian fishes, but we should be able to help you with mahseer. We'll have a pickled specimen in a jar somewhere. See you next week.'

In the meantime, I made another call: to Ron Coleby, the antiquarian bookseller, and ordered a copy of *The Rod in India* by H.S. Thomas, referred to in the brief catalogue text as the classic work on mahseer fishing. The volume arrived a few days later, an 1897 third edition, front cover resplendent with yet another mahseer-and-man illustration, stamped in gilt upon the dark red leather-cloth (reproduced at the start of this chapter). This time it was an even larger, but rather different fish — deeper bodied, almost hump-backed — suspended from a tree; below it stood another beturbanned Indian, quite dwarfed by the creature. I was experienced enough to know that huge fish do not always equate with great sport, so it was with some scepticism as well as interest that I settled down to read the book. Late that night, having survived all day on nothing but coffee and biscuits, I emerged from my room, raving. I knew, with a conviction that transcended reason, that I had to travel to India and catch the mahseer.

The actual body of the fish was something of a disappointment, but the circumstances in which I first saw it were not — they were unforgettable. Gordon Reid had greeted me at the reception desk of the museum and taken me behind the scenes into a part of the building closed to the general public. He showed me into his office, apologizing for an important and unforeseen meeting he had later that morning, and introduced me to a colleague, Gordon Howes, then a scientific officer at the museum. Howes was to search out a spirit-preserved mahseer and other 'bits and pieces' — throat-teeth and scales — for me, as well as some relevant books and papers from the library.

I followed him into the bowels of the museum, through high-ceilinged halls that

housed the animalian detritus of centuries. We walked briskly past old, wooden packing-cases marked 'African Elephant' and 'Borneo Expedition', then skirted a somewhat moth-eaten male lion lying on its back, its remaining three legs skyward. A giraffe leant unsteadily in one high, dusty corner. A porter moved these bizarre, broken remnants of a century of slaughter from one room to another. Years later, I was to see Hugh Hudson's superb and touching film, *Greystoke — The Legend of Tarzan*; and on seeing the young Lord Greystoke — Tarzan — find his 'father' (a great ape from the West African forests of his childhood) awaiting imminent demise and dissection in a museum laboratory, I remembered my day in search of the mighty mahseer.

We found it on a shelf in a remote storeroom. Four pounds or so of elongated carp in a jar of cloudy liquid. A label written in the copperplate script of another age recorded: '*Barbus tor* (Mahseer)', the place collected and the date, eighteen-eighty-something. Unimpressed, we retired to the staff restaurant for lunch. That afternoon I sat at a bench amidst the bunsen-burners, flasks and test-tubes of a Victorian laboratory. Fumes of ether and formaldehyde stood in as locum for a breathable atmosphere. In this curious room, reminiscent of the 'Stinks Block' of my schooldays, at a makeshift desk, I put the first flesh upon the bones of a legend.

It is time, now, I said something more about that legend, and just why a mild interest in a fish, half a world away and separated from me by almost a century in time, had so rapidly been transformed into something bordering upon obsession. In 1873, with the appearance of H.S. Thomas's masterpiece, *The Rod in India*, the angling world learned of the fish for the first time. The book, in parts, reads like a fairy-tale. Very nearly everything written about the mahseer since has the same unreal, mythic quality, as if the climate or diet of that lovely, crazy country had got to the authors and warped their powers of judgement. But I assure the reader that, while what follows may sound unlikely, every last bit of it is true. The mahseer may have woven its spell upon the authors of this book, but it has not, yet, completely bewitched them.

Imagine a fish which both lives and feeds in waters of such rapidity and turbulence that even a running salmon would yield to their power, and you have the mahseer. And it is a large fish: a huge fish running to perhaps two hundred pounds, a comfortable seven feet in length. Such monsters exist — I have seen one. For three thousand years, the Hindu had revered the great golden-scaled creature that haunted the pools and rapids of his local river; priests at bankside temples bore burnished metal plates of boiled grain each dawn and dusk to hand-feed their sacred fish; masons left images of the beast carved in stone, beside the usual friezes of gods cavorting with their improbably breasted consorts. In the fishing villages of central India, men sat in the shade of pipal and banyan trees, gambling with cards fashioned from mahseer scales; a large fish bears scales the size of a man's palm. London's Victoria and Albert Museum, I understand, has a set.

When the British expanded a small, successful Indian trading operation into the

# To Mahseer Anglers.

*IMPORTANT.*

Major Cumberland's **PATENT PRESSURE PLATE**

is the only safe thing to check the rushes of this fish.

The patent consists in making the axis of the Reel longer than ordinary, so that it projects through the bearing on the opposite side to the handle. On this projection is fixed a plate A (*see sketch*) of ebonite or other suitable material of about the same diameter as the reel. This plate revolves with the Reel, so that the user may easily control the speed by pressure of a finger on the plate. It can be fixed to any existing Reel, large or small.

*'The British tackle houses responded with typical Victorian thoroughness'*

full-blown dominion of a subcontinent in the late 1850s, they were compelled to recruit staff to rule and administrate this new addition to Empire. The number of exiles grew rapidly: the army, the civil service, education and trade brought thousands to India for the first time. As a recruitment incentive, young men were promised unlimited sporting prospects — everything from polo to pig-sticking to tiger shooting. Angling, however, was not on the list of attractions. India, though undoubtedly a land of many rivers, great and small, was considered to be lacking any fishy quarry worth setting up a rod for. However, it could not have been very long before the men who had once cast a line for salmon or trout at home saw a mahseer cruise submarine-like in the sunlit waters of a Himalayan river — so fine a body of water, it made their recently abandoned Scottish beats seem tame and tawdry in comparison. What angler could resist the challenge?

Their first encounters with mahseer were, almost without exception, catastrophic. The standard tackle of the period — a fifteen- to nineteen-foot greenheart fly rod, brass or gunmetal winch filled with silk, cotton or flax-fibre line, easily capable of landing forty pounds of salmon in British waters — was no match for the power and fury of the few fish they chanced to hook. The mahseer's savage take and awesome first rush broke many a rod-tip at the very instant of contact. Reels were stripped of line at such speed that their bearings would overheat and seize, rendering the angler incapable of yielding further line to the running fish. The encounter would end with the stout triple-twisted gut trace, or the line, or the rod itself, breaking with an explosive crack. And, as if to add insult to injury, the fish could take a spoon, stamped from ⅛-inch sheet brass, into its mouth and quickly expel it, crumpled like

a ball of paper. The very strongest of hooks met with a similar fate. Some very odd stories began to find their way back to the tackle makers in Britain, and I'm certain the first letters arriving in London and Redditch must have been greeted with wary disbelief.

However, the intelligence from the Indian rivers was consistent and unanimous, the message clear: 'Send us tackle with which we can land this fish.' The British tackle houses responded with typical Victorian thoroughness. Soon an array of special rods, reels and items of terminal-tackle was aboard steamers bound for Calcutta and Bombay. In the bungalows and officers' messes of army cantonments throughout British India, anglers awaited its arrival with eager anticipation. What an exciting time it must have been. The task before them was considerable: locating the fish's haunts, journeying to them (no mean feat even these days), discovering its habits and feeding preferences, before finally trying to hook and land one. As pioneers on a new angling frontier, their rewards were potentially great, but for every theory proved correct, every victory won, there was failure and numbing disappointment. For me, H.D. Keary's account of mahseer fishing in Burma in 1903, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, captures the essence of mahseer fishing, the spirit of the fish and the character of the men and women who fished for it. But what of the fish? Why was a mere outsized coarse fish doing such outrageous things to our forebears?

During the 1860s and '70s, a wave of scientists reached India and began classifying its wildlife. The icthyologists Buchanan, McClelland, Sykes and the great Dr Day soon had the measure of the subcontinent's fishes. The mahseer — that mysterious, huge-scaled, large-headed, capacious-mouthed omnivore with a distinctly carnivorous inclination — once put under close scrutiny, was found to be nothing more than a major carp; or, to be exact, a great barbel. They named it *Barbus tor*, and went on to discover that the fish occurred in five similar but distinct subspecies throughout this part of southern Asia: from Afghanistan, right across India and into Burma. Unconfirmed reports of mahseer also came from parts of Thailand and south-west China. One, of a localized appearance in unlikely Malaya, was later confirmed.

The fish, they found, was essentially a creature of the rocks and rapids, and one resident in only the upper and middle reaches of rivers rising at an altitude of at least 1,000 feet above sea level. Mahseer scorned the sluggish, silt-and-sand rivers of the Plains; the fish demanded gravel or stones beneath its belly for both feeding and spawning purposes, and seemingly revelled in flows resembling a watershoot. It was in the lovely hill rivers, with their pools, rapids and streamy runs, that the fish led their very active life: rooting around on the riverbed for crustaceans and small loach-like fish; or playing the part of the free-swimming predator, crashing into shoals of baitfish in the clear, pebbly shallows; and occasionally, when a supply of food allowed it, rising like some great trout to take fruit or floating insects from the surface. Here was the ultimate carp — versatile, opportunist and, as fish go, highly

intelligent — with a penchant for the type of water normally preferred by salmonids.

Of the crushing power of its bite, the scientists found ample evidence — not in the great, rubbery-lipped mouth, but at the back of the fish's throat. There, entirely concealed in folds of muscle, was set a pair of semicircular bones armed with three or four rows of heavy, enamelled teeth. These pharyngeal teeth, possessed to a lesser or greater degree by all members of the carp family, were capable of formidable mastication, designed as they were to crush to pieces the hard shells of freshwater crabs which could attain a six-inch span across the back. Little wonder hooks and spoons were dealt with so severely.

In the wake of H.S. Thomas's *The Rod in India* and Dr Francis Day's two-volume work, *The Fishes of India*, angling activity in Indian waters increased manyfold. No sluggard, the mahseer had earned the respect of many a former game-fisherman, who at home in Britain would have been pretty sniffy about a mere carp. The mahseer was now rated a worthy and formidable adversary: angling in India became an acceptable thing for a Victorian gentleman to do. Thomas's book was a tremendous success and he followed it with a sumptuous second edition in 1883, complete with hand-coloured lithographs of the fishes and contributions from anglers stationed in all parts of the Indian Empire. It is a delight.

If angling ever had a golden age, the last quarter of the nineteenth century must surely be considered a likely candidate. Angling has often been called, somewhat picturesquely, 'the brotherhood of the angle'. I take this to mean that, at its best, fishing is a sharing experience: one of comradeship, an unselfish exchange of knowledge about the thrilling minutiae of our pastime; a free transfer of practical and intellectual property, without thought of personal profit or gain; an enjoyable, rewarding individual and collective effort in the pursuit of fish. Thomas's Indian fishing books, written with a genuinely altruistic motive, embody this ideal. A social historian might say, and quite justifiably in my opinion, that they merely reflect the values of a small privileged class, at a time when it had little cause to fear competition — and that a comfortable situation allowed the individual to behave in a thoroughly civilized, decent fashion to others of his kind. But that still does not stop me from dreaming of being one of those lucky few — for a while at least — in that age of innocence. Social gaffes aside, I thrill at the thought of the fishing I might have had.

In the weeks that followed my visit to South Kensington, I spent many fascinating days in the India Office Library, situated just a few goodish casts along the Blackfriars Road from Waterloo Station. This remarkable establishment is a repository for just about everything ever written about India, and it was here I drew together the final threads of the mahseer story — once I had cracked the library index. The staff, more accustomed to writers and academics researching subjects such as social life in eighteenth-century Rajputana or the Kangra school of miniature painting, were somewhat baffled to meet a man in search of Indian fish. (Fifteen years later, I must thank the young woman at the library who so patiently helped me in my quest. I

regret that, in my eagerness to learn about mahseer, I neither took up her offer of lunch one day, nor even bothered to ask her name.) My reading encompassed H.S. Thomas's twentieth-century successors: C.F.G. Lang ('Skene Dhu'), Lacy, Masters and Conway. Their fantastic tales of the fish never faltered in the telling, and served only to enhance further the mahseer's already awesome reputation. Skene Dhu had assured the fish of legendary status in 1903 by calling his book *The Mighty Mahseer.* Lacy with his editorship of several editions of *The Angler's Handbook*, tirelessly catalogued fishing localities, each with a detailed map, a list of marches required, plus a little local colour along the way. The following contribution was submitted by a Captain Lumsden in 1885:

> The Jummoo Towi. — To fish or visit Jummoo, special sanction has to be obtained from the Maharajah. Visitors usually live in the guest bungalow and are the guests of the Maharajah. Fishing near any of the temples is forbidden. The bathing ghat at Jummoo and the *panchakkies* a little higher up are the two places visitors are usually permitted to fish. At both these places from 2 to 25 lbs. weight are to be caught. There are good fishing places also below the bathing ghat. Wading and spinning a 1½-inch spoon are most successful. The Maharajah also lends visitors elephants to fish from. These animals stand still in the river, and are quite accustomed to have fish caught on all sides of them.

At the turn of the new century, further tackle developments in the form of built-cane and steel-centred rods, well-engineered reels like the Hardy Silex and strong, oval-wire treble hooks rendered the exercise of mahseer fishing one a little less fraught with hazard. The fights of several hours duration diminished somewhat, the breakages similarly; but even modern tackle in very skilled hands was no match for the monsters of the larger rivers. Journals such as *The Field* and *The Fishing Gazette* continued to publish accounts of epic battle and disaster right through until the 1940s. The legend was not diminished by either new technology or time.

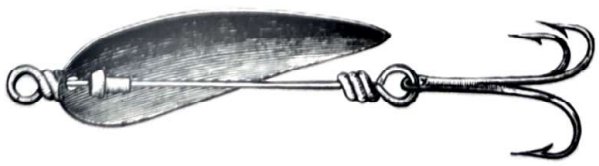
In 1948, a year after the British quit India, the greatest mahseer fisherman of them all published a much reduced version of his lifetime's work upon the fish. Major A. St J. MacDonald, *the* authority on mahseer for over thirty years, had at last (but, alas, too late for many) appeared in print. His book, *Circumventing the Mahseer*, a title borrowed from an H.S. Thomas chapter heading, must be considered the Bible for any serious mahseer fisher. Practical in approach, exhaustive in content, it records a time when the going was good for both the hunter and the hunted. MacDonald's writings of mahseer fishing in Assam and Burma would strike awe into the heart of any angler. They are simple, modest accounts of his encounters with mahseer in places which we, in this tired old world of the late twentieth century, can only marvel at; and they make me feel ashamed of the shoddy stewardship we have begrudgingly shown our planet. MacDonald's work quite simply marks the end of an era. When Indian independence came in 1947, the mahseer disappeared from view. Thirty years later, outside of dusty museums and libraries, I could find no trace of it.

As the packing-cases and rod boxes were loaded onto the last P & O liners bound

for Britain, a newly independent India had to set about feeding and clothing its millions. It was a mammoth task and one which, despite the mind-boggling bureaucracy and glorious chaos that accompanies any change in India, the country achieved against all odds. But, as I was to learn over the coming months, by writing dozens of letters to individuals, societies and Fisheries Departments all over India, that same industrial and agricultural development had virtually wiped out the mahseer. The hundreds of mahseer rivers listed in Skene Dhu's and Lacy's books were no more — destroyed forever and now virtually devoid of fish. Dams had been built for irrigation and hydroelectricity; barrages and canals reduced once great river flows to mere trickles, and the ladders for migrating fish so wisely constructed beside such structures now served as convenient traps for a hungry population in need of protein; fishery laws fell into disuse; dynamiting and poisoning of the nursery streams became sure-fire methods of mopping up the last remnants of a river's fish stock.

Nevertheless, in the coming months, as a result of a chance encounter, some remarkable coincidences, a little persistence and a lot of luck, I found myself in contact with a handful of people in India and in Britain who had caught mahseer within the last fifteen years. They were very helpful, but none too optimistic about my chances of catching mahseer today. To a man, they talked of mahseer as one would a threatened species. I considered my next move.

The impetus came from an unlikely source. During the course of my wide-ranging Indian researches, I had encountered the travel writings of Sir Richard Burton, the great nineteenth-century explorer, anthropologist and linguist. Burton, one of the most gifted yet misunderstood men of his era, often spoke of life's 'main chance', of a unique discovery, opportunity or encounter which must be recognized and seized come what may. He maintained that such a chance is never offered to the individual again: take it, or ultimately fail to achieve your full potential. At one period in my reading, I was with Burton and his companion, John Hanning Speke, not in India, but in Africa: on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. I had been seduced into following them on their 1857-9 expedition, during which Burton discovered Lake Tanganyika but lost his 'main chance' to the treacherous Speke, who discovered Lake Victoria: the source of the Nile, the greatest prize in nineteenth-century geographical exploration. Burton's words of warning now struck some chord within me. Perhaps the mahseer was my great chance, my sole opportunity to stretch myself? In the spring of 1977 I decided to travel to India the following summer in search of the mahseer.



**Chapter Four**

# Initiation

Paul Boote

Most journeys, I think, begin and all end with a sense of unreality.

Evelyn Waugh, *Ninety-Two Days* (1934)

There is a great deal to be said for wanderings in angling, whether around this Britain of ours or in lands across the sea. Strange waters cause interesting and variable mental reactions in the mind of the angler, no matter how similar the behaviour of the fish.

Eric Horsfall Turner, *Angler's Cavalcade* (1966)

At midnight on September 3rd 1978, BBC World Service radio news reported that the River Jumna at Delhi had broken its banks. An estimated nine hundred human lives had been lost. The Indian army and airforce had been mobilized to evacuate thousands of people from the city. The neighbouring states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh were awash. At eight o'clock the following morning, BBC Radio 4 news confirmed that the floods were 'quite unprecedented', with 200,000 people being evacuated from the Delhi area alone. And the waters were still rising. In Bengal, fifteen hundred people were feared drowned, their villages swept away. By September 6th, Delhi had an estimated 400,000 homeless. Food prices within the capital had risen by 400 per cent. Throughout northern India, many road and rail bridges had been washed away, those remaining were said to be in a perilous condition. Transport was almost non-existent — at best, chaotic.

Anita and I sat in our respective homes near London and viewed the situation with grim concern. We were due to fly to Delhi on September 17th. We had expected the trip to be something of a baptism of fire, but no travel books or assurances from Indian friends had prepared us for this.

The 8th saw a full-scale troop mobilization in the Ganges valley, one of the worst-affected areas. The World Service news used the word 'alarming' — about as strong as the BBC chose to get in those days. Further rain in the Himalaya, close to the sources of the Ganges and Jumna Rivers, threatened to inundate thousands of villages on the Plains below. Delhi had been reprieved, but the jewel in India's tourism crown, the Taj Mahal at Agra, now faced possible destruction. By the 9th, fourteen million people were sitting on their rooftops, watching floodwaters transform fields into an ocean.

An entry from my diary of the time: 'We are entering a disaster area. Why are we doing this?' We flew to Delhi on the 17th nevertheless.

* * *

The cow was a milky-grey, hollow-flanked, hump-shouldered creature and about as poor an example of the bovine race as I can ever remember seeing. It stood in the middle of the road, amid the horn-honk of weaving scooter-rickshaws, the bell-ring of bicycles and the brash roar of Tata trucks. She was eating. With head tilted a little to one side, and with an expression which betrayed obvious satisfaction, she unhurriedly consumed the front page of that morning's *Times of India.*

Adulthood quickly dulls the edge of youthful perception. Images and experiences from our formative years appear to shimmer with a fascinating intensity. We can never recapture the abject beauty of our first love, or the searing, often debilitating emotions we felt at the time. India affords many individuals an opportunity to re-enter that lost world and see through the impressionable eyes of an artist, if not the child.

Before leaving Britain, I had read quite a lot about India. I was a walking talking expert by the time we left. Within five minutes of arriving in Delhi, I realized that no amount of reading can prepare you for India's all-out sensory attack. A syrupy heat set our knees knocking as we set off, alarmed and apprehensive, into a crowded bazaar, in search of a hotel. Everything the elegant travel books had promised was before us now. The sights: bullock carts laden with grass fodder; the occasional, loping camel amid the chaotic mêlée of traffic; the beggars; the bargain-basement bazaar laden with the glittering trinkets of a thousand fairground stalls; the careless, unstudied beauty of the wide-eyed, tousle-haired street children — recent and unwanted additions to the ever-growing millions. The sounds: the wail of the *muezzin* from the minarets of Old Delhi; the calls and comic patter of street vendors; the blare of Hindi film-scores amplified to mind-shrieking intensity; the hideous chorus of expectoration from the latrines of cheap hotels. And the smells, exotic and mundane: of heat, dust and drying rain; of human life in concentration; of decay and death.

Kipling, Forster and Naipaul had seen and experienced it all long before, and had written of it so accurately, so compassionately. But the reality — to use an expression of a certain group of travellers found even now, according to season, in Manali and Goa — quite literally blows the mind. 'India distorts and magnifies,' V.S. Naipaul observed in his 1964 masterpiece, *An Area of Darkness.* I had written these words at the front of my travel diary, thinking them worthy of note as I 'did' India — Place and People — during my research at home. It was only several months later that I began to understand their importance and meaning.

Delhi, apparently, had shrugged off the ravages of the recent deluge. India, we would find, is a country that quickly cremates its dead, then finds time to grieve for

them as it gets on with the exacting task of living. Anita and I wandered around the city, observing life in this, the capital of the world's largest democracy; by turns impressed, awe-struck, astonished, at times horrified. We had a budget of a mere five hundred pounds sterling to fund the trip — as much as we had been able to save over and above the cost of flights, fishing tackle, camera and sundry equipment. A six-month trip, we had optimistically told friends and relatives as we left Britain. In prospect, therefore, was an endless and inescapable diet of second-class accommodation and travel and, worse still, third-rate food. We were bound first for the north-west, for the River Beas, on whose banks, over two thousand years earlier, Alexander the Great had halted, sat down and wept, plunged into sorrow by the realization that his epic journey of conquest, begun years before in Macedonia, was finally at an end.

The Srinagar Express, bound for Pathankot in the state of Himachal Pradesh, saved us. Several days and nights of bed bugs, cockroaches and the intermittent water and power supplies at our bottom-end hotel in Pahar Ganj bazaar had taken their toll; uncertainty, about exactly where we were going and what would happen when we got there, did the rest. Station porters dressed in red shirts, each with a heavy brass badge of rank tied to one arm, put our bags upon their heads and bore them away with an easy grace towards a Second Class Sleeper. An hour later, we were crossing the great northern Plains and loving the country more with every passing minute. *This* was what we had come to see! The evening sun poured golden light upon a dream of rural India; buffaloes wallowed in village water-tanks; chickens pecked at grain on a winnowing-floor; naked children swum and dived, yelling, into streamy irrigation channels; all was tiny settlement, glowing emerald field and seemingly limitless sky. A traveller's morale fluctuates wildly in this country. We were ecstatic. The mood soon passed.

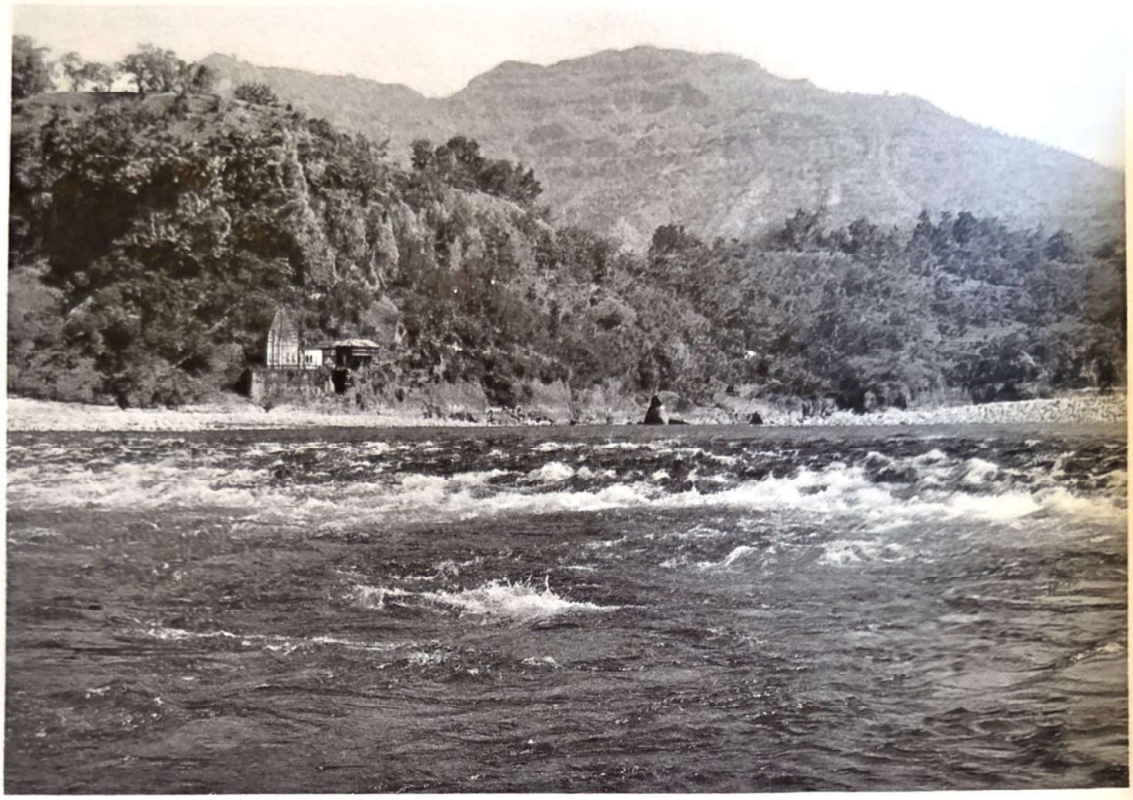
A few hours later we sat disconsolately with our bags among the sleeping bodies on the platform of Pathankot station. The night air bore a dank chill, a dog howled pitifully somewhere out in the darkness, and we had just seen the Dalai Lama. (He was met off our train by an army escort, then swept away in a motorcade bound for his residence high above the town of Dharamsala.) Allegedly, a bus left at dawn for our destination, Kangra. In the tentative light of the new day, the bus roared off from the stand, past waking villages, scrubby fields and wraith-like cattle, towards the first spurs of the Himalaya. Our spirits rose with the sun. Soon we were in a country of well-wooded hills and grassy meadows. The road climbed, winding in a series of tortuous hairpin bends through deciduous forest now resplendent after its recent monsoon drenching. Sheer ravines dropped hundreds of feet to boulder-strewn *khuds*, hill torrents, whose sparkling blue-green waters would shrink to almost nothing by winter's end. Ecstasy reclaimed me. Many of the passengers felt differently, however; the driver was a menace. Already drunk on departure at five-thirty, he was really giving the bus some throttle now, fairly hurling it around bends which boasted an easy thousand-foot drop to rocks below. Anita began to panic.

The other passengers, mostly Hindus, prayed to sundry divinities. I gazed at the lively waters, rapt in a transport of delight.

Around Kangra, the country assumed much of the character of English parkland. Stately, broadleafed trees led the eye down from a sweep of hills to wide, spreading meadows with a harmonious and unerring precision. Given three lifetimes, Capability Brown could not have created such vistas, nature's eye and hand being surer and more deft. Beside meandering lanes, villages of pretty brick-built cottages with fine slate roofs reminded me of a storybook land of Wales, upon which the sun shone always hot and strong. I had been here before, in childhood, and was certain that other, earlier exiles had felt the same. By one o'clock, after two more bus journeys (during one of which I was obliged to embrace a goat; and Anita, more conventionally, a baby boy), we saw the River Beas for the first time. We were travelling across a broad sandy plain, scattered with boulders and thornscrub. On the horizon, a band of dancing light fused with the deep steady blue of the sky. On reaching the river, like Alexander, we were ready to sit down and weep.

Lieutenant-General William Osborn, though, was not defeated by the Beas. As probably the best of the first wave of mahseer fishers in the 1860s and '70s, he won many an angling victory beside this river. He called it 'the very best mahseer fishing river in the Punjab,' and, as the Punjab of the time encompassed most of the the country that lies beside the five great rivers Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi and Sutlej (an area which today would include a large piece of modern-day Pakistan), this was fair praise indeed. But here, at the once famed fishing spot of Dehra Gopipur, the Beas had changed dramatically. On seeing it now, Osborn would storm off and berate the authority responsible. I had a little advance intelligence, however, and knew what to expect. The best pools on the river had become a lake.

From the veranda of the Government Rest House on the shores of the great lake, we could see that Dehra Gopipur was still very much a fishing centre. Boats plied the waters and a nearby signboard gave details of licence fees and catches. But net sizes and annual yields, it seemed, were the order of the day here now. Our largely clueless but extremely willing companion, Mr Sharma, encountered on a last agonizing bus ride, proudly reeled off names of fish, like mirror carp, *mulley* and *murral* — species I knew already to be the usurpers and inheritors of former mahseer habitat. We walked through the well-kept bungalow garden, its flowerbeds ablaze beneath the bright sun. In the distance, the lake looked blue and clear. We followed a well-worn path down to the water's edge and, on reaching a level strip of close-cropped grass, recoiled in disgust. Pong Dam Lake, the name of the body of water before us, was aptly named, its shores being in daily use as a public latrine. Mr Sharma insisted we stay the night at the bungalow and fish next day. He set off to see about licences. We made our excuses and apologies to the Rest House *chaukidar* (caretaker), then walked back to the town bus stand. It was one o'clock, and we had been travelling without sleep since five the previous evening. Anita was terribly tired and irritable. Scarcely better myself, I suggested that we make for



*A Hindu temple overlooks one of the more inaccessible hill-country reaches of the Beas*

Nadaun, a small town a few miles upstream of the lake, where we could at least see the Beas flowing as a river. A gazetteer dating from colonial times informed us that there were two bungalows beside the river here. Nadaun was known to history for its school of miniature painting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It seemed a perfect base from which to do some fishing in the coming days.

At the first bungalow, magnificently situated on the right bank of the Beas about two hundred yards downstream from Baroli Bridge (Photography Prohibited), we were treated to a memorable example of the rule by which petty bureaucrats and government officials the world round live and work: when confronted with the choice of doing either something or nothing, always do the latter; on no account act or show initiative, for you may later be held accountable if your decision proves to be incorrect. The Rest House staff, with whom we had enjoyed five minutes of pleasant chit-chat, then chose not to comprehend our requests (made in both English and the rawest Hindi) for a room. In India, an empty suite of rooms in a bungalow is a far less onerous and much safer proposition for a caretaker than a full one. If a touring government official arrives and finds 'his' room occupied by unauthorized residents, it is the chaukidar who earns his displeasure. Fading fast, we shouldered our packs and walked off to tackle the staff of the Public Works Department bungalow across the river. Pity was taken on us, and we were admitted. After an execrable meal in Nadaun, an impoverished rural backwater since its raja

art-patrons declined and fell, we went into an immediate and prolonged state of collapse.

The Beas, a tributary of the great Sutlej, is a rocky, snow-fed stream in its upper reaches, yielding some pretty fair brown trout fishing amidst the spectacular alpine scenery found near Kulu. On reaching Nadaun, it has grown into a handsome but at times extremely violent and unpredictable adult: a hundred-yard-wide band of restless water that pursues a purposeful, ever-changing course through pebble and boulder beaches, which are created, widened or destroyed at the peak of its fury each monsoon. Imagine a big northern salmon river, one that possesses all the familiar facets of watery character — rapid, riffle, glide, flat, stream and pool — then allow India to magnify and subtly distort it, and you have the Beas: a fine and not untypical example of a Himalayan mahseer river.

At seven-thirty the next morning, driven by a desire to fish, I was on the riverbank a few hundred yards upstream of the bungalow. Anita, still bruised and exhausted by our twenty-four-hour travel marathon, was with me. I set up a spinning rod and turned to address an Indian river for the first time. In brawling rapids the Beas rounded a bend upstream, then fanned out into a smooth, broad pool, the main flow pushing hard against the base of a low tree-capped cliff on the right bank, seventy yards or so away from where I stood on the left. A number of fish broke the surface of the glassy push of current a few yards out from the distant rock wall. I flung a heavy 2½-inch copper spoon at this target, covering the fish with the lure (and two other patterns) dozens of times in the next half-hour. I fished on, heart in mouth, for these were big fish — some of them twenty-pounders, judging by their determined, porpoise-like rolls.

We were not alone. A handline-fisherman was prospecting the shallows of the same pool. As we drew level with him, he scowled at the grey river and rocked his hand dismissively. An exchange of sign language with the man soon confirmed what H.S. Thomas had written more than a century before: that clear water is a prerequisite for successful mahseer fishing. The Beas, still partially in spate, was discoloured by sand held in suspension and, until the river fell in height and cleared, our chances — short of fishing a stationary natural bait — were dismal. We returned to the Rest House for a late breakfast. Over the frugal meal, we discussed the waiting game we were now compelled to play. The river would clear within a few days, the fisherman had told us; then, and only then, would our armoury of spoons, which had so impressed him, take those denizens below the cliff. I enthused at the prospect of catching our first mahseer within the week.

Two hours later, we were evicted from the otherwise unoccupied bungalow. The chaukidar, fearing for his job and anticipating the wrath of an omnipotent 'Junior Engineer, Hamirpur', had asked us to leave. Three hours later, having been plagued to distraction by the stares of every passing pedestrian as we sat on the road at the bridge, we were rescued by a bus. Its destination was the hill resort of Dharamsala, a place where at least a few travellers were known to go. We boarded the bus. Fishing

in India? We'd had it. We needed rest, good food and time to consider our next move.

In the coming weeks, we pursued the mahseer from one far-flung riverside hamlet to another, experiencing more ludicrous twists of fate, and growing to know a side of India denied even the most tireless traveller. For we were meeting people who had seldom seen, let alone met, a foreign visitor. One fisherman, who lived in a tiny watermill at a *triveni* (literally, three rivers — a confluence), after proudly showing us a fine, fifty-year-old, British-made twelve-bore gun, insisted that we were the first *sahibs* to visit and fish his home water since 1942. (Just what he made of this modern-day sahib's shoulder-length hair, I could not tell.) In tiny settlements, clinging to the edge of steep forested hills, approachable only by hour-long walks along narrow foot trails off the end of a dirt road (itself often twenty miles from the nearest town), we were fêted, entertained and shown a degree of kindness and hospitality that made us both feel wretched. The people of this part of Himachal Pradesh, well off the worn trail that leads to the hashish dealers and flophouses of the upper Beas Valley, will always command my greatest affection and respect.

And with the help of the local inhabitants we found the mahseer. Another bus took us out of the hills (where, it appeared, we had just missed the fish), down to a stretch of the Beas almost exactly equidistant from our earlier starting points, Dehra Gopipur and Nadaun. Bus journeys had become almost enjoyable by now, social occasions in which Anita won the affection of the local women and their babies, and I had English practised on me by a succession of students and would-be bank managers. Our destination, Jawala Mukhhi, in common with many other places of Hindu pilgrimage throughout India, is a town you would only wish to visit with very good reason. It is a small, down-at-heel place which just happens to have a spot where natural gas issues forth from a cleft in the rock. Sacred flames are kept burning within a temple upon the site. The temple is well patronized. Like many centres of pilgrimage, it has more than its fair share of unscrupulous and predatory residents.

The 8.2-kilometre walk from the town to the riverside hamlet of Ghallaur was necessitated by the failure of a number of these worthies to tell us that a bus ran to our destination late each afternoon. We had picked up some Hindi and a little Pahari dialect in the past weeks, and so knew our questions were understood. Yet they were met with laughter and disdain. There was no alternative but to walk. Cursing none too quietly, we set off down the dirt road. A walk of eight kilometres, or five miles, might seem pretty small beer to that new breed of adventurer who, finding it's all been done before, sets off to walk sideways across the Kalahari in a wetsuit; but it is not to be taken lightly when you are carrying sixty- and eighty-pound packs in the full heat of the Indian midday sun. By five that afternoon we had a tent pitched on a grassy promontory above the river. As the late sun began to gild the slopes of the valley-side opposite, and a kerosene stove comfortingly hissed away at the kettle, we were willing to forget our earlier descent into the valley of death.

A fine half-mile-long run lay below the camp. Soon, I was beside it with a rod. Before me lay a smooth, rapid-flowing body of water which ran beautifully clear over a bed of silvery gravel: a weedless, rather barren-looking stream, only populated, it seemed, with baby mahseer and shoals of a whitefish (the very image of the British bleak) known locally as *chilwa*. The latter were still dimpling the margins as I waded out from the beach. In the fading light, I threw a slim sprat-like spoon across the river and fished it across the current at varying pace. A hundred yards away, on the opposite bank, lay an ancient Hindu temple. A flight of wide, stone steps led down from it to the water's edge. On a narrow beach below smouldered the ashes of a recent funeral pyre. Dusk fell quickly and the river took on the colour of the great red sun, bathing the temple steps in a ruddy light. At almost the same instant, a series of frantic splashes and wallowings began to rock the river surface twenty yards out from the steps: huge fish, not merely sporting themselves but feeding. I cast to the fish, only to find them at the very limit of casting range. I redoubled my efforts, and soon was in as much of a lather as they were. I had entered a long-awaited dream. For years I had dreamt of places of immeasurable beauty and grandeur where great fish swam. And now, having found one at last, I began to shake.

A great wrench on the rod snapped me out of my reverie. I resisted the pull and heard the reel shriek in protest. The rod was dragged over into an extravagant bend, and remained that way whilst thirty yards of line were taken by a creature which seemed intent on reaching the opposite bank, climbing out and continuing the fight there. I hung on grimly, waiting for the fish to complete its run. After a few seconds, it did; the line fell slack. I began to retrieve my line from the midst of the fish rolling in the darkness a hundred yards away. Finding the spoon still attached, I swung it ashore for inspection. A torch beam revealed that one branch of the lure's heavy-gauge-wire treble hook had been folded round against the shank, a second had been straightened, and the third was missing its point and barb altogether. Never before had I seen a hook so comprehensively mangled. Surely no rubbery-lipped mouth could have done this? The fish had been under only moderate pressure from an 11lb-test line and was running freely; I had not bent the hooks by pulling too hard. I was more willing, now, to accept the old stories about pharyngeal teeth. (Months later I took two pairs of pliers to a new hook, and attempted to do to it what the fish had done to an identical pattern in ten seconds. Only after three minutes of judicious wringing did I manage to make a copy.)

The lost fish was several times heavier than any one of the twenty-five five- to eight-pound mahseer I managed to hook and land in the coming days. I felt at the time (and am certain now) that I had had a rare encounter with one of the elusive monsters fabled to haunt the Beas, fish which rarely see and seldom take an angler's lure. Several months later, half a subcontinent away, I met an elderly gentleman with over forty years of mahseer fishing experience. As a young man, Major Radcliffe had inspected a 140-pound mahseer caught on a handline from the Beas close to the

town of Mandi. My leviathan was probably not a third of this weight. Nevertheless, it was an early encounter with a comparatively mighty mahseer, and the memory of its brief display of explosive power gave us the strength to go on.

* * *

The temptation to narrate at length just what happened next — river by river, month by month, during the period September 1978 to May 1979 — is strong; for it makes a good story. The features editor of a national Sunday newspaper once saw it like this: beautiful, brave young woman and water-struck companion in search of mysterious fish, experiencing all manner of trials and tribulations across the length and breadth of India. (His pictures editor wanted lots of shots of young Anita sitting beside rivers, wearing her bikini. When I offered him perfectly nice pictures of fish, he seemed to lose interest. The story was shelved soon afterwards.)

We were in India for nine months. There were good times, and there were, to be honest, some quite terrible ones. Soon after reaching the town of Dehra Dun (our next port of call after the Beas), dysentery and malaria took Anita in their remorseless grip. I watched her body waste away in the space of just a few days. A kind couple we had met in the town took Anita to their doctor. A correct diagnosis was made, and the mysterious ailments (which other doctors had been taking shots at for weeks) were cured. In the months that followed, it seemed almost as if we took it in turns to be ill — one nursing the other through to health and good spirits, only to fall sick soon after. The recurring illness was almost wholly due to diet. When camped on a remote river somewhere, cooking our own meals and eating lots of freshly caught fish, we stayed remarkably healthy. On returning to a town, a couple of three-rupee meals in the bazaar would make us ill again. We paid heavily for our low budget.

But along the way we caught mahseer — lots of them. After the Beas, we tried the upper Ganges and Jumna Rivers and several of their tributaries. Using Dehra Dun as a base, we fished from mid-October until mid-December. But as we fished, winter stole into the north, chilling the land and its waters. Mahseer, like carp and barbel anywhere, become torpid in low water temperatures and disinclined to feed. It was time to move on, to fish the warmer waters of the South. We would return north with the spring.

In Delhi we boarded a southbound train. A twenty-four-hour journey took us to Bangalore, capital of the state of Karnataka. From mid-January until late March 1979 we fished the lovely Kaveri River. Here, I tangled with the stuff of legend, hooking and landing several huge mahseer, and catching many small to medium-sized fish beside.

On our return to Dehra Dun in April, we found the Ganges out of sorts; snow-melt had grossly discoloured the river, putting mahseer off the feed. We tried a small, clearwater river instead: the West Ramganga. Its fish were tiny in comparison

with the southern giants, but, after all the recent do-or-die work, catching them was fun — a word whose meaning I had almost forgotten in past months, so serious had the quest for mahseer been.

At the end, we found it hard to come to terms with a growing realization that our little epic was finally over. India had changed us. (As it will any person who attempts more than just a whistle-stop tour of the sights.) I considered life back home, after this. Then I remembered Alexander; and extended to him my commiserations, across the millennia. It was time for us to go home: to forget some things, to remember others, and to start afresh.

* * *

During my months in India I had corresponded with Sandy Leventon and Bruce Vaughan, then respectively editor and assistant editor of the excellent, but now sadly defunct, *Angling* magazine. After my penniless return, I visited their Windsor offices many a lunchtime, taking a well-earned break from my new van-driving job. It was over a pint in the Two Brewers pub, across the road from the office, that Sandy asked me to write a series of four articles for the magazine. For me, the commission was a great morale-boost. I had returned to Britain full of enthusiasm, eager to tell friends (and any angler who'd listen) about mahseer, and how they owed it to themselves as anglers to go to India and try for the fish. I had not, however, taken into account the essentially parochial character of the British angler in the late 1970s. The response was hardly ecstatic. On hearing my story, even old fishing pals had said things like, 'What d'ya wanna go and do something like that for? Aren't British fish good enough for you?' Less sympathetic sorts branded me a crank, a lucky rich bastard — even a liar. As a result, I poured my heart into those articles. Writing them (to start with) was good therapy; it helped me to get India out of my system.

As I wrote, I resumed my research — collecting and reading just about everything significant written about Indian fishing. In addition, I was reading much about the country, its people and religions. I'm sure that Ron Coleby, doyen of antiquarian sporting book sellers, rues the day he sold me all those India books and articles and an H.S. Thomas manuscript for a comparative song! The reading, however, did nothing to dull the pain. In fact, it only went to fuel my desire to return to India and conclude some unfinished business with the leviathans of the Kaveri and the Ganges.

My mother, seventh child of a seventh child, with northern English, Irish and northern Spanish antecedents, is a firm believer in Fate. As children of our parents we tend, in adolescence, to disagree violently with their every attitude and belief and instinctively contravene family edicts and household rules, which, generally, are made for everybody's good. We *must* do this to become adult individuals ourselves. For years I strongly pooh-poohed my mother's every pronouncement on Fate,

believing cool, diamond-hard reason to be the instrument with which to dissect and analyse the unaccountable events that occur in all our lives. Recently, I have begun to think differently. I now see fate (note the absence of a capital f) as something that *does* exist — not as the conventional, fickle mega-being who toys with us as whim dictates, but more as a phenomenon of our own making. A self-created rising curve, rollercoaster or brief brush with the Midas Touch perhaps, which, often, we unwittingly bring upon ourselves and then ignore, exploit, neglect or ultimately lose to our cost. I will explain and elaborate, using the example of what happened to me next.

The first article of the series was to appear in *Angling* magazine's August edition. Its publication date coincided with that of the annual Game Fair. As the magazine was to carry my image on its front cover, Sandy and Bruce asked me to spend three days with them, on their stand at the show. I was asked to preside over a display of fine colour prints made from the transparencies Anita and I had taken in India, and chat with any visitors to the stand who might express an interest. I found the prospect daunting.

My apprehension was further aggravated by my somewhat quaint appearance. (Some would have called it shabby.) As a sop to the old colonels who, at the time, still patrolled Game Fairs and similar events, I had my mane of long hair cut short, removed a long-worn earring, consigned a much patched pair of Levis to the dustbin and bought myself a pair of dark-green corduroy jeans (which at a glance could be mistaken for smart trousers) and a Marks & Spencer's cotton check shirt. In this outfit I looked almost presentable — quite the young landowner, in fact. But I felt a sham, and feared someone would soon detect this fake, blow the whistle, and send me back to my driving job in the west London suburbs.

In my naivety, I had omitted to consider the evenings we were to spend at a very self-important country hotel. Horror of horrors, I had failed to bring a jacket and tie! John Buckland, the fine salmon angler and writer, lent me both, enabling me to join the others in the bar and dining room. As I went downstairs, looking like the scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*, I knew that none of these niceties mattered a jot; I wanted to be back in India.

The next morning, a young, very English Englishman appeared at the stand, and proceeded to display a considerable interest in the mahseer prints. The man cornered me for half an hour, during the course of which I learned that he lived and worked in Delhi. He had fished for mahseer, too. I enthused about the Ganges, then mentioned Dehra Dun.

'My wife, Lakshmi, has a young brother at school there,' he volunteered.

'What a coincidence,' I replied. 'I know the principal of one of the boarding-schools in the town.' I mentioned the man's name.

'I know him, he is the boy's headmaster,' was the reply.

We were getting on famously. I outlined the circumstances in which I had met his young brother-in-law's headmaster, and how this had led to me striking up

friendships with a number of very interesting people. 'There was one incredible old boy, visiting the school from Delhi. Great tiger hunter in his day. John Wakefield was his name. Works for a big tour-operator now, conducting wildlife and birdwatching holidays ...'

'I know him, too. He's my father-in-law.'

We looked at one another, grinned tentatively, then fell about laughing. When he left, the young man gave me his business card, took my address and said that he would be in contact. A few months later I was back in India, working with John Wakefield, leading gameviewing and fishing tours.

Such chance encounters occur in all our lives. Call it fate, coincidence, serendipity — what you will. And, though their outcome is not always for the better, such freak occurrences invariably leave us with memories of a time when life was led at a faster, more exciting pace. Afterwards, we suspect that — for a brief, wild, chaotic period — we were no longer the masters or mistresses of our own destiny. Some of the less certain among us consult astrologers, in the desire for a sneak preview of such moments. A psychologist would dismiss this as nonsense, and say that our complex presents and futures are much more self-determined: we bring glory and success or calamity and failure upon ourselves, by transmitting positive and negative signals — sometimes consciously, mostly unconsciously — to those around us. What we get back in return is our fate or destiny. Whatever the cause, I was dazed and not a little confused by the rapidity with which events were happening to me now.

I worked through to the end of the year, thrilled at the prospect of returning to India. But at the same time I felt a glimmer of apprehension. I sensed I was beginning a journey. Not an upwardly mobile dog-scurry towards fame and fortune, but an altogether more risky course to some ill-defined destination — one which offered some rewards along the way, but no promise of material security upon arrival. Sometime in the past, I had casually chosen a non-standard model from the life-direction showroom. Later, occasionally lacking the means to maintain and service this exotic means of transport, I was to pay certain penalties for my choice.

Ron Coleby, in the meantime, continued his searches on my behalf for Indian fishing literature. A postcard announced the imminent arrival of *Game Fish of the World*, edited by Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald. I was promised a whole chapter about mahseer. It was worth a look.

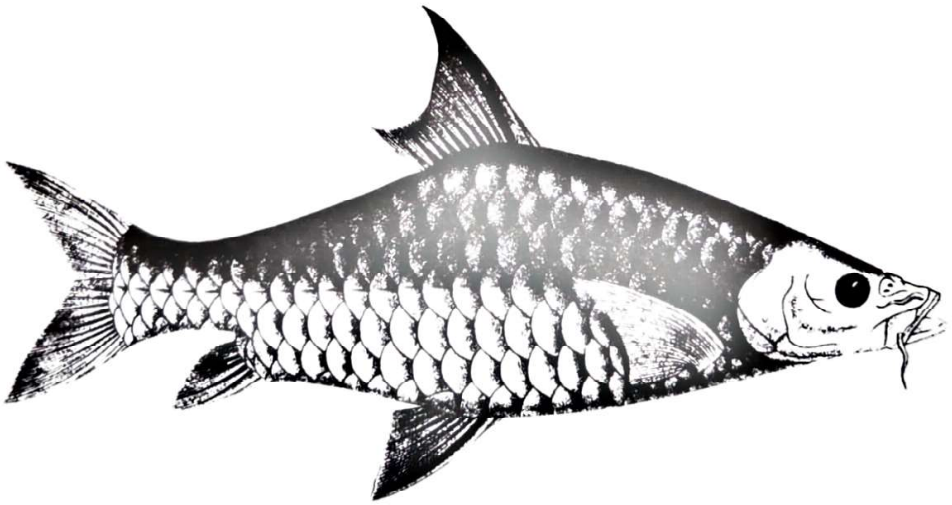
Lt-Col R.B. Phayre MC FLS, the author of the chapter, made a sound but unspectacular job of describing the joys of mahseer fishing. In a footnote, he promised further elucidation upon a certain technicality in his book, *Indian Fishes and How to Catch Them*, shortly to be published by Thacker & Co, Bombay.

The footnote had been written sometime in the mid-1940s. In 1947 the British quit India, leaving poor Phayre without a readership. History caught him on the hop. His book was never published.

If you turn to page 396 of the 1949 British edition of *Game Fish*, you will find

Phayre's ill-fated footnote. On the opposite page is a colour plate which will leap out and grab your attention. It certainly did mine. You will see a sleek, toothy creature, with blue-black back, silvery flanks, distinctive horizontal stripes and splendid orange fins pursuing three tiddlers with purposeful menace across the page. The illustration, Plate 76, is captioned 'TIGER FISH *(HYDROCON LINEATUS)* East Africa'. I turned at once to the relevant chapter and read it. My heart began to kick a little faster. I moved on to the next, written by the same author, Leander J. McCormick, read a page or two, stopped, and simply uttered, 'Oh my God!'

Somewhere in the heart of Africa swam a giant fish named *Hydrocynus goliath*, the goliath tigerfish. It grew to more than 150 pounds in weight; could leap eight feet clear of the water when hooked; possessed teeth of over an inch in length, with which it could sever a man's limb in a single bite; and, though so rare that only a very few anglers had hooked a specimen (even McCormick's account was second-hand), was reliably considered to be the fiercest fish that swims. I pondered this news and, at length, made a decision. The terrible Goliath would have to wait. India beckoned to me yet.



**Chapter Five**

# A Lost Domain

Paul Boote

> As yet, however, the Ramganga is but
> little known, and as one is only human I must admit it rather
> goes to my heart penning the following notes.
>
> Cecil Lang ('Skene Dhu'), *The Angler in Northern India* (1910)

Since man first walked this earth, we have as a species longed for a land that is not to be found on any map. Different cultures, widely separated in space and time, have variously called it Arcadia, Elysium, El Dorado ... Shangri-la. Man's mind appears to carry within it an image of an earthly paradise, a land where one's sorrows are no more: a collective wish, perhaps, for a return to the long summer of childhood.

The exact topography of the region has varied from age to age, though general consensus holds it to be a place of astonishing natural beauty. But tastes change; and today, for many, I fear, Arcadia would offer too many dangerous bulls in muddy fields and not enough evening entertainment. Modern Xanadu, with its manicured leisure complexes and theme parks, stands but in shoddy comparison beside the shimmering structures and pristine landscapes of the human imagination — or, for that matter, beside the few remaining pockets of country in our own world that we have failed to develop and destroy. The valley of the West Ramganga River in northern India is such a place.

Rising on a far western ridge of the Kumaon Hills of the Himalaya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, the West Ramganga River flows on a south-westerly course into the eastern part of a district known as Garhwal. This may seem a very precise and rather cold-blooded way in which to introduce Paradise, but as the river exists and is not a figment of my, or any other's, fevered imagination, I might as well be factual. It is a spring-fed river, with a source situated well below the snowline, and as a result suffers none of the insults and indignities that are visited upon its neighbours — such as the mighty Ganges — with tedious regularity. In springtime, beneath a bright sun, you may easily count off the pebbles on the riverbed in twenty feet of water; or observe the unhurried, underwater progress of a python as he makes for his lair in a cavern below that pretty jumble of rocks at the head of the pool where, just yesterday, you sat and posed for a friend's camera.

This is Himalayan foothill country par excellence. The home of the broadleaf *sal* (*Shorea robusta*), which cloaks a multilayered vista of round-topped and knife-edged hill ridges; sweeping down into valleys where, only when defeated by gradient or solid rock, it yields to bush scrub and *bharbar*, the rope maker's grass that trails from the ramparts of precipitous cliffs. Later, as the youthful vigour of the hills begins to falter, the valley broadens into riverine plain; here *shisham* (*Dalbergia sissoo*) and acacia shade reedy pools and the wind chases cloud shadows across wide grasslands, known to the hardy folk of the surrounding hills as *chaurs*. The aquamarine waters of the Ramganga in their individual response to each obstacle and feature put in their way have shaped this country. Never quite large enough to carry off convincing fury, they skip and dance and fret away like an agile bantamweight at a heavier opponent, with great style, imagination and well-judged vigour. Spray-hung fall and chuckling rapid, purling run and oily pool, shingle beach and deep-cut bend, an exuberant kick of watery heels as escape is made from the confines of a narrow gorge, a certain reticence to leave a fine pool, a firm butting at a cliff wall — these are endearing features of this busy little river. Whilst all water must obey the same physical laws, that of the West Ramganga just looks a little better than the rest when doing so.

There are doubtless a thousand grander and more beautiful places on every continent, but few so fire the imagination and set memory hard to work as this land can. It at once presents us with a portrait of our world before the arrival of man: a vision not of some hostile, primeval wilderness but of a benign, as yet unworked land; a place compliantly, trustingly awaiting man's interest. But in this lovely country of sunlight and shade, in the long shadows thrown by the brilliance of its beauty, danger lurks. Unprompted, memory summons images ever present in the minds of distant ancestors who once burned fires in the mouths of caves to see them through the night. For tiger stalk these forests, leopard the upper hills, and elephant — encountered everywhere — bellow out their displeasure at our intrusion. No fairy-tale world this, no Narnia or Middle Earth, but a region of our wildest daydreams and darkest imaginings made real. A place apart which has long taught man a much needed lesson in humility.

The British first entered the region in the 1820s and were immediately impressed with both its beauty and economic potential. They at once set about taming the place: shooting the abundant game for sport, ploughing the natural grasslands and putting virgin forest to the axe and saw. Later, repentant of their crime, they set aside certain tracts of land as shooting preserves. Logging was ended and further inhabitation forbidden. The forests were returned to the animals, on the condition that Lord Governors and Viceroys could appear periodically and provide a spectacle of slaughter for their distinguished guests. These bizarre and bloody forerunners of modern-day corporate entertainment nevertheless helped save the forests and their bounty of wildlife.

Jim Corbett, the great hunter turned proto-conservationist, later immortalized the

same forests in his writings and by doing so played a vital part in saving them from destruction in the years immediately preceding and after independence. Corbett's book, *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, records his efforts in the first forty years of this century to track and kill a number of the man-eating tigers which terrorized the inhabitants of this area of the Himalayan foothills. One had accounted for no fewer than 434 human beings before falling to Corbett's rifle. The book makes fascinating, exciting and, in parts, spine-chilling reading. Jim Corbett, born and raised in Kumaon, knew its people, jungles and wildlife better than any other Briton living in India at that time. Like many of his exiled compatriots, he grew up with the gun, but, unlike them, developed an affinity for the forests and their wildlife that transcended practical knowledge and mere hunting and tracking ability. The jungle was Corbett's true milieu; its environment transformed a prosaic hunter cum small-town businessman into a veritable lord of his domain; it inspired him and gave him a voice. That understanding and compassionate voice still speaks to the reader nearly forty years after his death, and continues to help protect thousands of tiger and leopard throughout India today.

The West Ramganga River flows through a 201-square-mile tract of hill, forest and savannah grassland called Corbett National Park, a wildlife reserve named in Corbett's honour and memory by the Indian Government shortly after his death in 1957. The reader already knows something of the river; it is time to take a closer look at its sparkling waters and see what dwells beneath them.

Nineteenth-century writers regularly laced their accounts of sightings of mahseer in the clear waters of north Indian rivers with lines like: '... and from the vantage point of the cliff high above the pool, you will be afforded a glimpse of a goodly array of *ironclads*.' What an apt and splendidly pictorial word for the fish I am about to describe: *Barbus tor putitora*, the Himalayan or Golden Mahseer. Found throughout the northern half of the subcontinent and its neighbouring countries, out of the five separate subspecies living in southern Asia, *putitora* is the one recognized by most Indian anglers, past and present, as 'The Mahseer'. It is a sleek, streamlined fish, large-scaled, with golden, orange and pink-flecked flanks, copper-brown or green-brown marbled back, white belly and orange fins. The head is large and long with a capacious, carp-like mouth possessing a set of rubbery, protrusible lips and two pairs of barbules for enhanced bottom feeding. The body is hard and muscular and carries not an ounce of surplus fat. The fish is an athlete.

Sit on a rise above the river, beneath a sal which will offer shade from the fierce March sun, and look a while into the settling waters below the fan of foaming rapid at the head of a pool thirty yards above. I have a particular pool in mind. It lies a little downstream of Gairal Forest Rest House in the eastern part of Corbett Park. Rub the sleep from your eyes before putting on the pair of polarizing glasses. That insistent, noisome female tiger in search of a mate, roaring and moaning her protestations of desire, just forty yards across the lawn from the bungalow veranda,

caused you to lose some sleep last night. As your eyes adjust to the flickering water-light you first notice the obvious features of the riverbed: an expanse of clean, golden pebble and gravel; a large submerged rock in mid-pool, a fallen section of the bluff that lies at your back; then a flurry of small fish rising and falling in the contrary currents below the massive boulder. One might be looking into the hatchpool of an English chalkstream — the forest about you could be Chiltern beechwood transported to the grander country of the Wye Valley at Tintern. Was that *really* a tiger last night?

Set comparisons aside, still the mind and watch the river. The current-shadows on the radiant gravels are hypnotic; the tiny fish move erratically like mobiles in the first unruly zephyrs of a hurricane. You are just thinking that there could be worse lives to lead than these when, like the fragments of an exploding bomb, they scatter. A shadow has appeared from behind the rock. They dart bottomward to its base for shelter as a slim, streamlined fish, at least a yard in length, cruises round about with all the feigned innocence of a cat stalking sparrows. Mahseer!

Later, back in the bungalow, you recall a vivid, yet disjointed series of images from the minutes which followed: a hand reaching across to the rod on the rock beside you, fingers absent-mindedly teasing the smoothness of the line above the reel, eyes all the while held by the moving image of the creature below. Your urban life and business suit, a host of civilized values and reasoned objections to such feelings are forgotten: nothing will still the heart that pounds beneath the salt-stained pocket-flap of your shirt. Down the slope you crawl, knees oblivious to the sharp stones and dropped thorns; eyes only on the prize, watching the fish's every movement, willing it to remain languid and unaware of your presence until you make the cast. And as the plug — a three-inch-long exercise in fishy artifice of metal and plastic — touches the white water thirty yards above and is swept down towards the submerged rock in the pool, your abiding sensations are of terror, sickness in the stomach, bitterness in the mouth, of lungs fit to burst.

With a rapid crank of the reel the lure starts into life, wriggling attractively down the flow, diving towards the boulder and its covey of sheltering fish. Their tormentor is nowhere to be seen. A movement of the rod guides the plug with enticing precision across the area. Your hands are no longer your own: the instinct of an ancient hunter wills them to guide that diminutive, factory-made Trojan Horse into the enemy's lair.

But the moment of crisis passes. The plug continues downstream a yard or two from the rock and then ineffectively chugs its way through empty water towards you. And that, together with an emotion of disappointment tinged almost with relief, is the last thing you clearly remember. For a shape has suddenly peeled off from the shadow of the boulder and is now pursuing the earnest little piece of plastic with murderous intent.

You cannot now be certain, but you think you saw a great kick of the tail and a white flash of the opening mouth as it happened: when the rod went over and

nearly flew from your hands into the river, as the enraged fish, feeling the hooks, shattered the surface into shards of sunlight before setting off up the pool at such speed you were forced to laugh aloud — fearful, manic laughter.

In seconds the mahseer takes the white water upstream and wins through to the smooth, shallow flat fifty yards above. There, it attempts to warn the waters of its passing by means of an enormous splash, and at that instant the rod springs back, the line falls loose, and floats back down the current towards you. Waves lap the pebble shores of the flat above. A peacock shrieks in alarm from the shawl of woodland across the river. You sit in a lather of confusion and sweat, feeling slightly ridiculous. That is mahseer fishing.

Mahseer are not always so demonstrative in their affections towards the artificial lure. For a good part of each spring season on the West Ramganga, the fish lie immobile — mostly ignoring, sometimes closely inspecting, and, on occasion, even smartly sidestepping the varied procession of whirligigs thrown at them by anglers. In the clear, sunlit waters, lures are seen and judged for what they are: awkward and unconvincing approximations of small, living fish. Those discerning, highly desirable mahseer can be caught, however.

Corbett Park in April is magnificent. As the Plains below begin to simmer in preparation for the pre-monsoon inferno, the foothills remain pleasantly warm, with even the occasional breeze to moderate the hottest day. The forest is ablaze with colour. On the hillsides, a curious metamorphosis is taking place. The sal is at once shedding leaves and breaking bud to produce new ones. A walk through the trees affords the opportunity of an autumnal, leaf-kicking saunter, whilst above, a brilliant, hot sun illuminates the pale watery green of new spring leaves. Below, the river runs perilously low and clear between wide, sun-bleached beaches. The great rock in Gairal Pool is now above the water, bearing strange, serpentine patterns, dark against the white of its rounded upper surface: the inch-wide tracks which the bottom-feeding *calabanse* fish have described with their underslung mouths, while feeding on the algae adhering to the rock when it was submerged. This brown-green slime coats every pebble in the river and renders wading at times an exercise more akin to walking across meticulously greased ball-bearings. A borrowed image, I own, but there is no more apt description. The river, in the weeks following an early March downpour, has shrunken and withered. Mahseer mill around the slack pool like potted salmon in a summer drought, but unlike their anadromous counterparts, they are compelled by hunger to feed — albeit sporadically.

In April, then, the hill country looks ravishing. The river is no less lovely, but for a visitor here solely to fish it can soon become a place of torment. This was how I found the Ramganga on my first visit and, unaware of the truth — that the prevailing conditions were utterly hopeless — I set about trying to catch fish. I flogged the pools and runs with plug and spoon in the normal fashion for days, without success; crept up on fish and cast to them from inaccessible vantage points (which would

have earned the approval of a *goral* mountain-goat), hoping to surprise an individual into making an impulsive snap — more in defence of its territory than out of hunger. To no avail: the mahseer were suffering from acute lure-fatigue. Many years ago, some wag, an English chalkstream angler, referring to a particularly well-educated and uncatchable trout, ventured that not only did this fish recognize every fly pattern he floated over it, but that it could also name the shop from which each originally came. A similar situation appeared to prevail on the Ramganga.

I set about finding a natural bait that would tempt the mahseer. A morning spent hunting freshwater crab beneath the slabs and boulders of a shallow run resulted in a mere two specimens apprehended, a comprehensively mauled finger and a grazed knee — the result of a wading stumble. I lost both captures to the riverbed in consecutive casts that afternoon. Crab, therefore, was off the menu. Next came small fish, for use as deadbait. These proved no less difficult to catch than the mahseer themselves. Earthworms, likely candidates, were virtually unobtainable during this period of hot, dry weather. Finally, as so often happens when fishing an unfamiliar water, it was a local fisherman who solved the problem by his example. Returning, sunbaked and fishless, to the bungalow one morning, I met the chaukidar carrying a mahseer of about eight pounds up from the river below the lawn — the same area of deer-cropped grass prowled in another year by the amorous tigress. He produced a handline and a lump of the successful bait: *atta* flour paste — the dough from which *chapatis* are made. I had earlier dismissed this bait, reasoning that the wild mahseer of this lightly fished and almost unpopulated stretch of river would have had little opportunity to sample the food of man. I was wrong.

Purists may wrinkle their noses at the use of bait — or spoons and plugs for that matter — but to them I would like to say two things. First, when conventional methods fail, don't deprive yourself of the opportunity of enjoyable sport on an anachronistic point of honour. 'When in Rome do as the Romans do' is a perfectly acceptable maxim — especially when you are away on holiday, far from the strictures of normal fishing convention. (I am *not* suggesting you fish at home with maggots for trout when the fly has failed!) And second, if you are a fly-fisher and are becoming increasingly disturbed by references to distasteful methods employed to catch an outlandish fish in a place you are unlikely ever to visit — have patience. Your turn will come. The mahseer, like many fellow Indians, can play cricket with the straightest of straight bats.

That afternoon I played safe and fished the Chaukidar's Pool below the bungalow. For two-thirds of the width of this long, narrow pool the water was little more than ankle-deep, only attaining any sort of depth — six to eight feet — hard against a low rocky shelf on the far bank, thirty yards away. Two SSG-size splitshot were sufficient to take a thumbnail-sized ball of paste down to the riverbed and allow it to trundle with the current, bouncing along the bedrock, pebbles and gravel as it went, while I held the rod-tip high and a yard of slack line at the ready out from the rod above the reel. Glad of a more sedentary routine at last, Anita lay in the sun reading a book as

I fished. A few minutes later her concentration was distracted by my yell and volley of muttered curses, as I strove to stand from a kneeling fishing position in the shallows, to take the fight to a hooked fish that had already made forty yards of very swift progress down the pool. I will spare the battle talk. Most fights with mahseer hooked on sporting tackle are epic in their own manner and, besides, I have better tales to tell in due course. However, a thirteen-pound mahseer was landed a quarter of an hour later from the thin rapid at the neck of Gairal Pool, a hundred yards below. It was the first of many in the coming days. None was mighty (the biggest was eighteen pounds, a very good fish for this small river), but all were memorable — the difficult ones always are.

* * *

Below Dhikala, the site of Corbett Park's visitor accommodation and field centre, lies Kalagarh Dam: a sixteen-square-mile lake created in the 1960s when a dam was thrown across the gorge through which the Ramganga passed as it left the foothills and entered the Plains. Besides flooding precious wildlife habitat, the lake has dramatically affected the mahseer population. Increasingly, fish have chosen to live and feed in the richer waters of the lake, only quitting it for the river to spawn during the summer monsoon. The lake has also served as a refuge from the predations of ospreys and kingfishers. As a result, the entire Ramganga system now probably holds more mahseer than at any other time in its history. But, as many experienced anglers will agree, more fish do not necessarily offer better fishing. In the greater part of the Ramganga River within Corbett Park there are now fewer and smaller fish than there were during the pre-lake era. One stretch has benefited, however: the three miles or so of river which lie immediately above the lake. As the Ramganga's waters warm in March, this reach receives a wave of migrants that have decided to abandon a comfortable existence in the lake and seek a more thrilling life back in their ancestral home.

The Ramganga above the lake reminds me of a small Icelandic salmon river I once fished, the Halla: a shallow, clear, rocky stream, impetuous in its haste to reach a tiny cliff-hung cove across whose narrow beach it raced, heedless of imminent demise, to meet the grey swell of a northern ocean. The same sun lights both these sparkling waters; the same mournful beauty surrounds them; the same feeling of a race run, of a life ending, prevails upon the angler. Farson was right: there is a lot more to fishing than just catching fish. When these lovely, lonely places bring a lump to the throat with their mute evocations of the fragile beauty of this earth, and start tears to the eyes with powerful intimations of one's own mortality, I can only shudder at how good a job 'education' and modern society do in transforming that fabulous experiment in life — man — into a destructive, tight-jawed, profit-seeking worker-ant for the brief duration of his days.

There is also another, less cerebral likeness between these two far-flung waters: it

is that both are fished in exactly the same manner — with a single-handed fly rod and floating line. Tube and streamer flies are just as attractive to mahseer as they are to Atlantic salmon. The water above the lake is a medley of boulder-strewn rapid, fast run and shallow pool. Pool necks and tails are areas particularly favoured by mahseer; so too are the precincts of any sizeable rock. A card-table-sized slack in the midst of a foaming rapid can hold a twenty-pounder. An angler, obliged by the climate to wear nothing more than shirt, shorts and a pair of training shoes, wades with care and prospects with the fly in every likely spot. The response can be spectacular: a mere four- or five-pound fish, after a murderously savage take, can strip a hundred yards of line from the reel in seconds and leave an angler floundering after it in breathless confusion. When the fish are 'up' and 'on', they can be most accommodating: seven mahseer of between three and eight pounds being my best morning's catch over the years.

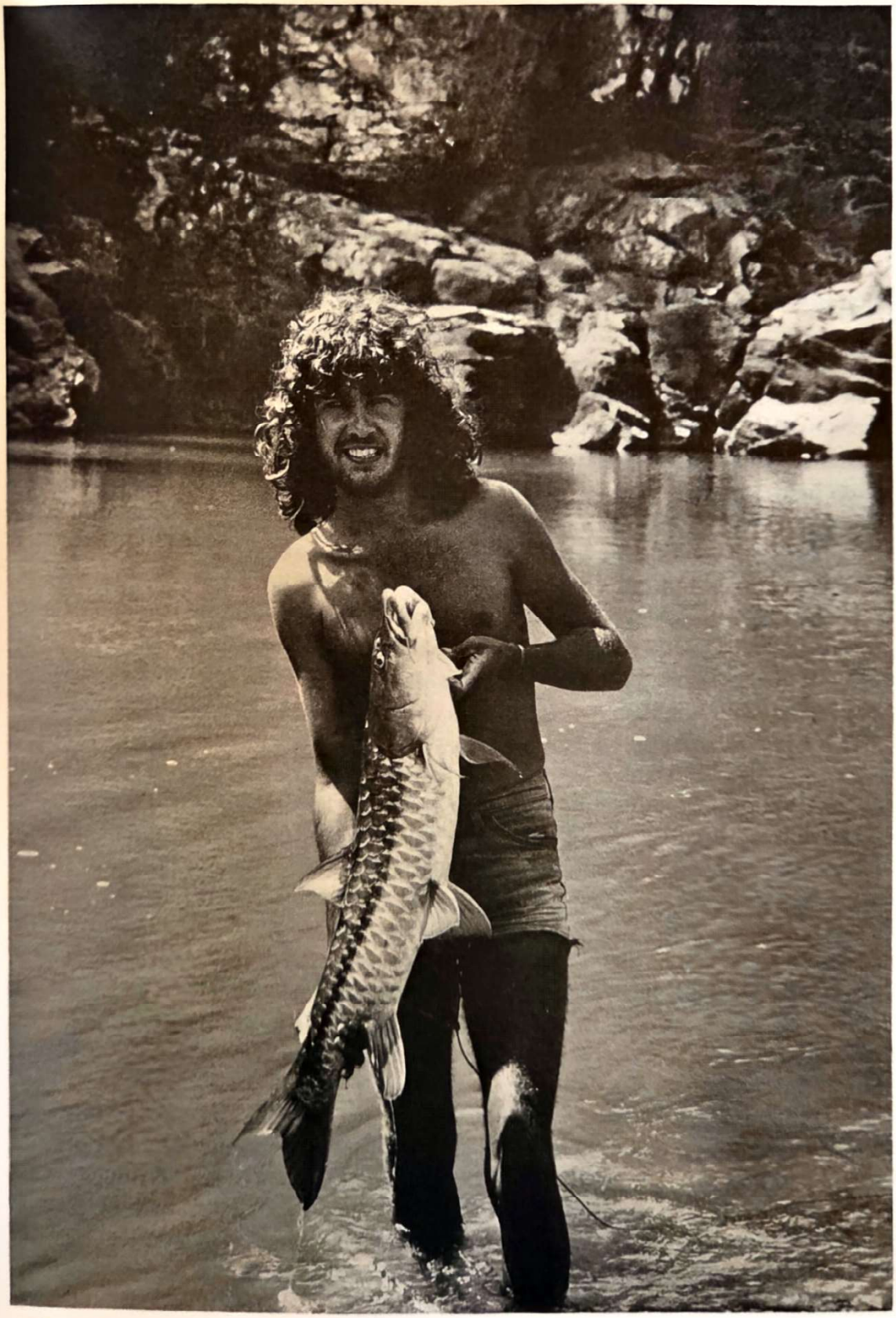
The pool, close to Dhikala, where the *mahouts* — the riding-elephant drivers — wash their steeds, once offered excellent sport right in the middle of afternoon bathtime. Visitors witnessed the twin spectacle of a group of elephants happily hosing one another down on one side of the pool; and a contented, much occupied man, casting, hooking and playing fish from the other. They applauded both equally. Such fishing is *fun* — an important consideration which should not be overlooked by any angler.

* * *

Sarapduli, which means 'the snake pit' in the Hindi language, is a place more noted for its nightjars, which call unceasingly throughout the hours of darkness, than for any superabundance of cobras and kraits. On more than one occasion here, insomniac residents have stumbled from their beds onto the bungalow veranda and bellowed, 'Will you shut up!' — or worse — into the jungle night. An unwise move, for this inevitably prompts every peafowl roosting in the locality to commence a prolonged chorus of cries and shrieks which, in the sleep-loss stakes, far exceeds that of the little nightjar with its low-key chirrings.

Situated beside the river midway between lovely Gairal in the east and Dhikala, fifteen miles away to the west, Sarapduli provides a pleasant, quiet base from which to fly-fish the lower river above the lake. The fishing immediately about the bungalow is nothing special, the very best pool being closed to anglers, reserved as a sanctuary for the rare *gharial* fish-eating crocodile. The pool is full of mahseer but, having watched a thirteen-footer chase them about its clear waters with remarkable grace, I was content to leave the fish to this impressive saurian. (The pipe-nosed gharial is not a man-eater; the square-headed *mugger* crocodile, which shares the same habitat, most certainly can be.)

It was as we ate lunch on the veranda one hot March day that the usual murmur of the little rapid in the home pool below was interrupted by a succession of what



*13lb Himalayan mahseer taken on atta paste: West Ramganga River, April 1979*

could only be described as loud, lip-smacking slurps. I checked our number at table and, on finding that all were present, set off to locate the source of the noise. The little pool, presumed fishless for at least a fortnight, had suddenly sprung to life. Half a dozen mahseer rose steadily, sipping large, floating insects with a noisy, kissing sound from its surface. The insects were flying termites which, in the manner of ants everywhere, leave their nest at the onset of hot weather and set off to begin a new life elsewhere. These inch-long creatures filled the air with their awkward flight and many, misjudging their course or compelled to abort and ditch by a fickle breeze, were landing on the river. The mahseer, like oversized trout, were busily taking advantage of the windfall.

Lunch was abandoned. I raided my tackle bags and exhumed a box marked 'Big Dry Fly'. It contained British mayfly dressings and a few heavily palmered salmon-skaters; the latter, tied on single hooks of the estimable Wilson pattern, looked just like miniature flue-brushes — late night aberrations at the tying-bench months before. A six-weight, weight-forward floating line was hastily transferred to a reel which held plenty of backing, and an eight-foot graphite rod, victor of encounters with well over a thousand trout back home, was pressed into service. It was now surely about to meet its match — and probably its maker, too. I tore out of the bungalow like a whirlwind, scattering anything that was not screwed down tight in my wake. Once beside the river, I crept to the downstream end of the pool, knelt down upon the pebble beach there, and, like some perverse, latter-day disciple of F.M. Halford, scanned the waters above. I dissolved into the mush of nerves and fumbling hands, tempered by dark intent, that grips me whenever I am close to feeding fish. The mahseer continued to rise.

Somehow a spent-winged mayfly was knotted to the leader, smeared with flotant, and cast. The fly landed gently, ahead of a loosely curved line, floated down the current for a few seconds and then, as a dark shape rose towards it in apparent interest, promptly sank. The fish declined the sunken offering. The boisterous flow of the Himalayan river was too much for a sparsely dressed dry fly intended for use on the quieter waters of an English chalkstream in mid-June. My only alternative was the flue-brush skater, but I knew that this apparition, slicing across the surface like wind-driven thistledown, would alarm even these preoccupied fish.

Many people think that fire was the greatest of man's discoveries; some, the smelting of bronze and iron; whilst others claim it to have been the invention of the wheel. They are all wrong. It is the Swiss Army Knife. With this device man can effect urgent running repairs upon faulty nuclear reactors, set light to piles of moss and twig, file his way through prison bars, cut his fingernails and, in dire emergency, even make the necessary adjustments to over-dressed and ill-conceived fishing flies. With this marvellous tool, the answer to many a full-grown Boy Scout's prayers, I trimmed a ball of feather fibre into an acceptable imitation of a dying insect trapped in the surface film of an Indian river. A few casts later, on lifting the rod in response to a gentle but noisy inhalation of this barber's shop fly, all hell broke loose.

Turning on its tail the fish shot down the pool, showed me a sovereign-gold flank at the surface a few yards out as it passed, and proceeded to clear the reel of one hundred and thirty-eight yards of line. (We measured it later.) The cheap reel made horrible screeching noises until, impelled by forces unforeseen by the makers, its ratchet pawl threw out of engagement with the retaining-spring. The reel, as a result, remained unchecked for the rest of the fight and offered little comfort as I strove to halt a fish that appeared determined to regain the waters of the lake several miles below. The mahseer stopped in a pool a long way down — so far down, it seemed as if I was attached to a fish swimming in a different county. I greyhounded after it, holding the little rod high above my head (how idiotic we look at this time) and began to refill the empty reel. Two more pools, three hundred and fifty yards and thirty-five minutes later, I slid a nine-pound mahseer across the shimmering purple-and-violet surface of a sunlit shallow. The fish, like all the mahseer I have been fortunate enough to land, was returned alive to the water. In much poorer fighting condition myself, I made a weary way back to my understanding friends at the bungalow and a celebratory glass of Old Monk rum.

* * *

Memories. Of an early-morning car ride from Sarapduli to the lake below Dhikala: a fantastic journey, as the sun crested the Kanda ridge to the north-east, striking a layer of mist that hovered in stark isolation above the grasslands, suffusing it with light. Below this incandescent strip, in surreal contrast, lay a land in darkness: a shadow-world in which hundreds of spotted *chital* deer grazed, a few hog deer pushed their round-eared heads above the dew-soaked grasses, and wild pig rooted, lifting and showering about them great snoutfuls of earth with comic vigour — all seemingly unperturbed by the sound of the slow-revving engine as we glided past.

And of an evening walk: returning from the lake, fifteen minutes ahead of the vehicle, whose driver had been left with a binocular to watch our progress — and an instruction to look out for the big male tiger which, just that morning, had been seen stalking a group of deer that had injudiciously prolonged their feeding period on the chaur at the forest edge until well after nine o'clock. (A group of foreign tourists, who had complained bitterly of an absence of tiger during their *three* elephant rides, had witnessed the swift silent slaughter of a kill just a hundred yards from the very spot where their womenfolk were planning to do a little sunbathing.) We walked along the dusty track. A few stag were visible as they lifted their fine heads periodically to scan the meadow and scent the air. Away to the north, across the river, the hill ridges dissolved into shades of darkening blue and purple haze. The lovely golden light upon the grasslands fled before an advancing host of shadows. The natural world seemed filled with a sense of sudden urgency. As if on cue, more deer appeared from the forest; peafowl clattered noisily among the branches as they settled for the night; a troop of rhesus macaque monkeys, ever

throwing backward glances over bony shoulders, scampered a short way before also taking to the trees. A distant mahout called imploringly to his charge, to abandon her evening meal and return with him to camp. Birds flapped homeward. And from beneath the shadow of the trees there came the urgent *Hoo-hoo* alarm call of a chital, followed by repeated stampings of a foreleg hoof for added emphasis. Close by, in the forests of the falling night, a great creature had awoken.

Wherever we may fish, we share the waterside environment with many living creatures. And whilst, on occasion, we will rant at an invading goose or suffer near heart failure when a dog-fox barks feet from us on a dark night, the serendipitous company of animals as we fish is a constant source of pleasure and delight — and also a strong affirmation of the health of a water and the surrounding ecosystem. It is tempting to adopt a preaching tone when talking of the last wild places on this planet — to regurgitate the message of a host of ably written and eloquently argued green tracts which spell out, with varying degrees of pessimism, the environmental doom that surely faces us all. I am not going to do this now, as I am certain I would be preaching to the already converted. But there is one last story from my many days spent beside the West Ramganga which might just state the case of the natural world in its last battle for survival with man, the ultimate predator, and spur more of us into action before it is too late.

The fishing had been poor for some time. Low water is the kiss of death to good sport on the Ramganga: Skene Dhu had warned of the problem in 1910; and the visitors' book at the old Gairal bungalow continued to record his successors' laments upon the dreaded condition, until the fascinating volume sadly disappeared in the early 1980s. Despite the deployment of minor tactics such as fly and bait, nothing would consistently induce the fish to take. Angling had become a peripatetic form of sunbathing; a means of pleasant exercise, when a token rod was carried, while the eyes and mind noted some of the lesser, daily goings-on in the surrounding valley. A good angler possesses much of a hunter's stealth and is capable of moving quietly and unobtrusively in country through which I have seen eminent naturalists march with all the finesse of stampeding cattle. The rewards of quiet discretion can be considerable.

One morning, a family of otter, seven in number, announced their arrival at the tail of a pool with a breathy high-pitched whistle. They bounded pell-mell through the shallows, the half-grown pups playing tag with their brothers' and sisters' tails, and ascended a sandy mound on the opposite bank just thirty yards from where I stood — motionless, rod dipped, fishing forgotten. The otter then used the riverside slope of the mound as a playground slide down to the water's edge, where, after a brief ducking and vigorous dog-like shake of their bodies, up to the top they would streak, to slide down once again. Three minutes of this game were allowed before the otter bitch, with a brief, assertive grunt, summoned the cubs to follow her across towards the deep water on my side of the pool. A row of seven sharp-eyed, bewhiskered faces appeared above the surface a few feet from where I stood. The

mother then saw or smelt me, and yelped in alarm; with the most delightful and endearing cries of what to me sounded like elation, the band of careless revellers set off down the pool, racing through the pebbly shallows with the sinuous, quicksilver grace of eels. I would not trade that experience for a hundred great mahseer — or salmon either.

A few fish did fall during those difficult days; just enough to make it worth my while continuing to take a rod down to the river. One afternoon I chose to fish Gairal Pool, give the fish there half an hour to scrutinize and deride a ball of paste, then set off downstream to a fine deep pool where the previous day I had seen a real battlecruiser — all of twenty-five pounds — swimming about with a fish's tail protruding from its jaws. Judging from the size of the tail, the victim looked to have been a mahseer of at least four pounds. I fished Gairal from a narrow strip of sand at the water's edge downstream of the formerly submerged rock; at the foot of the bluff from which we observed the plug-taking fish recounted earlier. I legered the bait upstream, using sufficient lead to hold the riverbed beside the rock. I felt lazy, so put the rod in a forked stick and watched the shallows dance in the sun. Twenty minutes had elapsed when my daydreams were interrupted by a small avalanche of rocks and shale from the valley slope behind. A common and quite spontaneous occurrence during the hot weather. Dusting myself off, I went downstream to try for the greedy ironclad. The deep pool detained me no more than forty-five minutes, including the time spent walking there and back, for the big fish was nowhere to be seen — doubtless tucked beneath a rock shelf somewhere, still digesting his meal. I returned to Gairal to spend the last half hour of daylight, leaving the rod to fish for me again whilst I observed the antics of the peafowl and monkeys in the shisham trees across the river.

As I neared the sandy spur, I noticed that the forked stick no longer stood upright and presumed the chaukidar had popped down for a few minutes' fishing before cooking dinner. He had probably just gone. Looking down at the sand, I saw footprints — not those of his bare feet, but huge footprints — two sets, one larger than the other. In the firm, damp sand at the water's edge a few yards on, I found the cause of my rapidly growing unease: a perfect impression of the pad and toes of a large tigress, a pug-mark some five inches across. Beside it lay a smaller print, equally sharp, that of a cub several months old — itself no fireside tabby. Prints made earlier by my training shoes were also visible; the larger animal had neatly overstamped one of them with its own. Nearby, the dry sand on which I had sat bore traces of water drip and splash. The pair of tiger had drunk from the river. A chilling realization dawned: the avalanche had signalled their arrival on the slope at my back. And they had patiently sat and watched me slap the dust from my shirt, and ruffle my hair free of rock fragments, mutter a few profanities, and wind in my line, and check the sharpness of the hook, before I set off downriver. I looked across to the bungalow upstream, a picture of radiant homeliness in the evening light; my companion sat outside reading, awaiting my return; and behind me, unseen

on the forested hillside, a mother and her offspring lay, awaiting the departure of this intruder from their domain. I stole away silently, remembering, then mutely repeating — until it echoed in the darkness of my fear — the exhortation that greets every visitor to Corbett Park from a signboard at the Dangarhi entrance gate:

*You are in the Realm of the Animals. Leave only Footprints.*

**Chapter Six**

# Ramganga Days

Jeremy Wade

Fishing for mahseer in a well-stocked submontane river is, in my opinion, the most fascinating of all field sports.

Jim Corbett, *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944)

When I dropped my bazooka-replica rod tube into the semi-liquid tarmac outside Delhi airport in early 1982, I was only two-thirds prepared for what was to follow. I considered myself well versed in the ways of catching fish; I had been given a run down (in Paul's letter) of the mental adjustments necessary for Indian fish; but I knew next to nothing about surviving in a foreign land.

The reason is simple: while most of my contemporaries a few years earlier had been riding Greyhounds round the States and Inter-Railing through Europe, I had been coaxing a succession of terminally ill cars to and fro between far-flung lakes and the local dole office. My only concessions to a wider world had been two chin-on-the-tank motorbike thrashes to the South of France, during which my feet touched French soil only at traffic lights.

So as I paused outside the airport building on that skin-shrivelling March day (having got off a plane that was shortly to be hit by a ground-to-air missile launched by the Afghan mujahedeen), my confident mask undoubtedly radiated that aura of innocence that gives away, every time, the trusting first-timer.

The figure in the shadows must have suppressed a very strong urge to rub his hands together.

'Yes? Cheap room?'

Without being aware of quite how it happened, I found myself bumping along inside a black-and-yellow auto-rickshaw and vaguely under the impression that, in response to my negative reply, the nice man was giving me a free lift into the city.

We called at some friends of his who happened to run a hotel nowhere near where I wanted to go. The smiling Sikh proprietors took me on a tour. They showed me an air-conditioned room: 175 rupees a night, they announced proudly. A little-used gearbox in my brain made a couple of squeaky turns: that was about twelve pounds, stay in a place like this and I could look forward to going home in two weeks. I politely admired the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the walls ...

'Okay, special price for you. One-fifty. Because you are our friend.'

'Uh,' I said. 'I think there's been a misunderstanding. I'm not actually looking for a room at all.' They remembered they had another for seventy-five. 'Sorry, but — yes I do like it ... yes, very much — but my budget just doesn't run to it.' Their smiles dissolved at this unlikely revelation, as they shuffled to block the door. That was the instant I learned my first vital piece of travel lore: that there would be times when I would temporarily have to discard my instinctive bonhomie and indiscriminate goodwill — and this was one of them. I gathered my bags and pushed past into the street, where, with a knot of others doing the same, I attached myself to the outside of a passing bus. A couple of hours later, I turned up unannounced, with bags, at an address given to me by a helpful relative. Brief sanctuary was granted, but I was going to have to learn fast.

Certainly I had the incentive. My all-in kitty was less than half what acquaintances took for drinks-money on a fortnight's skiing (a couple on a three-week India-by-rail tour fell about when I mentioned the sum). Not having the option of spending my way out of difficulty or discomfort was going to force me to dig for other resources. And if I didn't come up with something quickly, I was going to be on a plane home before I had even wet a line.

Almost before I knew it, I was sleeping on patches of city-centre grass, on seething railway station floors and between dusty luggage-rolls on the roofs of buses. A ten-rupee doss-house was a treat. There was the small open boat moored to a weed-bed in the middle of a lake, and the icy Buddhist monastery clinging to a mountainside. Worst of all was the fourteen-hour night train between Jammu, Kashmir, and Delhi. Trying to sleep standing up is not easy at the best of times. With several people standing on your feet, and still other feet between you and the floor, it becomes a mite more problematical. But at least living at this level was within my means.

Payment was exacted in kind. I normally have a fairly stoical attitude to illness — carry on as normal and it will go away (and not return so readily) — but here, during a stay that stretched to three months, it immobilized me for days on end. Going so far below the comfort threshold for so long without a break is not something I would willingly do again.

But there were two compensations. The rare high moments, when they came, had something about them, a certain rawness and intensity, that touched and caused to resonate the remnants of something otherwise lost. It was the start of a new addiction. The experience also left me with the confidence (which was not shattered until some years later) that, after this, anywhere else would be easy.

* * *

The Ramganga River as it tumbles through Corbett Park in low-water March is a joyous, clear stream singing over its sun-dappled bed. Tantalizing glimpses from the

bus as we careered along the cratered track to Dhikala cast a powerful spell. And it is so fitting that the river should be here; for the dispenser of retribution to India's man-eaters also loved angling, and the Ramganga is a prime example of the kind of water he exulted in. The dedication to Jim Corbett's memory is doubly apt.

And the fish! Long, streamlined shapes holding vigilant position on the current-edge. Darting shadows in the deeps. Omnivorous and alert, with a feeding repertoire that runs from rooting between rocks to smash-and-grab lunges at smaller fish, these mahseer can be tempted by a great variety of methods. In particular they provide, at certain times, the opportunity for some incomparable fishing with artificials. I was fortunate enough to arrive at such a time.

But landing them was to prove far from straightforward. The sheer speed off the mark of these northern torpedoes leaves the nerves in shreds, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. Then there is their ability — unbelievable until witnessed — to bend or crush even the strongest hooks.

The first fish I hooked, on a light copper-and-silver spoon, was gone after half a second. One of the points of the double-strength treble hook was bent fifteen degrees out of true. I switched immediately to one of the murderous-looking size 1/0 trebles that I had brought with me as a last resort. This appeared to be the answer. Later that afternoon my first two mahseer came safely to the bank: a brace of five-pounders, the second of which completely cleared the water on taking — what drama!

The next day, however, my belief that I had the measure of these fish was demolished in grand style. One of the supposedly unbendable, extra-thick-wire hooks was returned looking as if it had gone fifteen rounds with a pair of pliers. What was more disconcerting, it hadn't felt like a particularly heavy fish — I had halted its first rush relatively easily.

Some serious thought was called for. Was it, as I had heard, that some fish inhale the lure so deeply that they mangle the hooks in their vice-like throat-teeth? In desperation, I tried mounting the hook in front of the spoon, rather than trailing behind. This way it wouldn't go so far inside the mouth on the take. I also experimented with large single hooks, which should — following the vice analogy — flip round when squeezed, thereby avoiding being crushed.

One fish only just nicked on one of the back-to-front spoons and another hooked on the outside of the mouth — plus the first hook-bender that I actually landed, where the hook was nowhere near the back of the mouth — told me that the throat-teeth theory was, in this case, incorrect. The conclusion was hard to swallow: it is purely the musculature of the mahseer's telescopic mouth that is responsible. It is humbling to know that even a seven-pound fish can bend with its mouth a piece of metal that I with all my strength cannot budge one millimetre.

But although the big hooks regularly suffered cruel disfigurement, it turned out that, on the whole, they would retain their shape sufficiently to bring fish to the bank. It was a solution of sorts. But it was not a completely tidy one; my mind

*Goonch taken accidentally on light spinning tackle, displayed by Corbett Park mahout*

continued to nag at the problem. Was it possible, for instance, that by applying a constant strong pull on the line, the angler unwittingly assists the fish in its efforts to bend the hook as it twists and turns its head? If one slackens off, therefore, will the fish be denied the purchase it needs?

My answer came very quickly. I cast a floating plug, equipped with double-strength trebles, to a disturbance near the far bank, struck at the ensuing swirl and immediately slackened off. Back came the plug with one hook-point snapped clean off and another severely bent. The message was clear: whatever tricks you try, use the super-strong hooks every time. (Another interesting possibility is that the fish can use the body of the plug for leverage, even with a slack line, gripping the lure with their lips while extending the mouth, thus pulling on the hook-hold. Experiments with breakaway hooks to rule out this possibility were inconclusive on this trip, but have since led to a promising area of investigation.)

Further insights came. A stealthy approach often revealed dark shapes (jet-black in strong sun) just inches from the bank. I would creep upstream, let a plug float down with the current, then provoke a reflex grab by swimming it into eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation ... I noted how, on occasion, fish that I hooked would be shadowed

by an individual of similar size ... But the question to which I most impatiently sought the answer was: How do I single out the big ones? Already there were some pointers.

First, it soon became apparent that the better fish (eight pounds plus) tended to fall to plug rather than spoon. I can only guess that water clarity, good vision and the caution that comes with age are the reasons, as I saw fish turn from spoons a few times but never from a plug. Big fish seem to need a more lifelike lure to fool them.

Also, the larger fish were more often than not to be found in the faster water: in the middle of the river, rather than at the sides. Again I can only speculate as to why. Here, presumably, they are relatively free from the competition of their more numerous smaller brethren, which are less able to cope in strong current. There is thus more water, and food, per individual in the fast water for those capable of exploiting it. (The presence of better-equipped fish in the faster water is in turn another reason, if they need one, for the smaller mahseer to remain segregated.) Whether or not this is the correct reasoning, certainly the phenomenon is a real one, and one that is duplicated in similar rivers.

Taking this fast water / big fish observation to its logical conclusion, one would expect any fish to be found in rapids to be consistently of above-average size. And possibly this is where the biggest individuals are. Gradients are such on the Ramganga that rapids are few and far between, but my limited evidence supports this idea. The only take I ever had right in the middle of white water took me with explosive savagery way down into the run below, against all the resistance my 18lb line could muster. When the fish finally stopped, I worked my way down to it, whereupon the line started audibly slicing back upstream at improbable speed. (I had attempted to swim here, but found it impossible even to hold my place against the current.) Only after several more anxious minutes was the long, golden fish ready for scooping out of the water. Thirty-five inches to the fork of the tail and weighing an estimated fifteen pounds, it was the second-biggest mahseer of my stay.

So: fast water, big fish. But fish will always confound you. One day I walked downstream to try the lake, and with the bail-arm of my reel already open and the 18lb line hooked round my index finger ready for casting, something made me dunk the spoon in the margins below the rod-tip, intending to observe its action as I drew it through the water. In the muddy liquid at my feet something erupted mightily and the line was torn from my hold. I grabbed at the cone of vapour hissing from the spool (to have snapped the bail-arm shut would have been disaster) and squeezed as tightly as I could bear as the line sliced up and away across the shallows.

About forty yards distant the fish paused, allowing me to flip the bail-arm over. The friction plates of the reel could now take over from my burning hand. Fifteen minutes passed without my once sighting the fish, despite the water in that bay being in no place more than three feet deep. Then, once I had managed to work the fish in close, a bizarre thing happened. There was a huge double swirl in front of

me, and something long and black raised itself out of the water: a large, serpent-like tail. But the fish I drew onto the gently sloping mud bank a few minutes later was the rich hue of old gold. Thirty-six inches long and a good eighteen pounds, it was my biggest mahseer from the Ramganga and a timely reminder that rules (fishermen's rules) are invariably made to be broken. It also confirmed beyond doubt, in the absence of any flow, the awesome power of the fish. No carp I have caught would have resisted such tackle so strongly for so long.

So ends one strange tale. The strange tail was identified the next day — an uncharacteristically dull day of sudden squalls and showers. My four-inch blue-and-white Rapala plug was slowly wiggling just below the choppy surface in the same corner of the lake when something unseen slammed into it and wrenched it to the bottom. A fast, powerful fight ensued, the creature staying deep all the while, until eventually a sinuous shape, four feet long, rose to the surface. Similar in general design to the European catfish, but not so solidly built or broad-headed, this was (ugly by nature and equally ugly by name) *Wallago attu*, known locally as the *latchi*, and elsewhere in India as the mulley. Capt. C.W.W.S. Conway, the author of *Sunlit Waters* (1942), describes it more eloquently than I can:

> Mulley are revolting-looking fish. They have an enormous head with a cavernous mouth full of very sharp teeth ... Directly below and behind the head is an obscene paunch, round like a bladder ... It is said that they may be had as large as one hundred pounds in weight, but I have no information of any such fish ever having been taken on rod and line.

Mine weighed about twenty pounds, and three smaller ones followed in the next few days, all on surface lures — an experience not without its excitement: one twelve-pounder hurled itself almost clear of the water as it took. The only other mahseer I enticed from the lake, however, was a baby of a pound and a half.

But the latchi was not the weirdest fish I caught. That dubious accolade must go to the apparition that revealed itself at the end of my 11lb line following a half-hour battle of nerves and will that took me 250 yards downriver from the bend where it had engulfed my spoon. Looking like something constructed from leftover spare parts of other miscellaneous creatures, it had a wide, flattened head that was virtually all mouth (and teeth!), little piggy eyes, shovel-like pectoral fins, a smooth, tapering, blotchy-patterned body and then, to complete the effect, assorted tentacles attached to places such as its tail. This fish, all fifty-six inches of it (including the tail tentacles) was a representative of the largest predatory species living in the Ramganga, the *goonch* (*Bagarius bagarius*) — living proof that successful design is not always aesthetically pleasing.

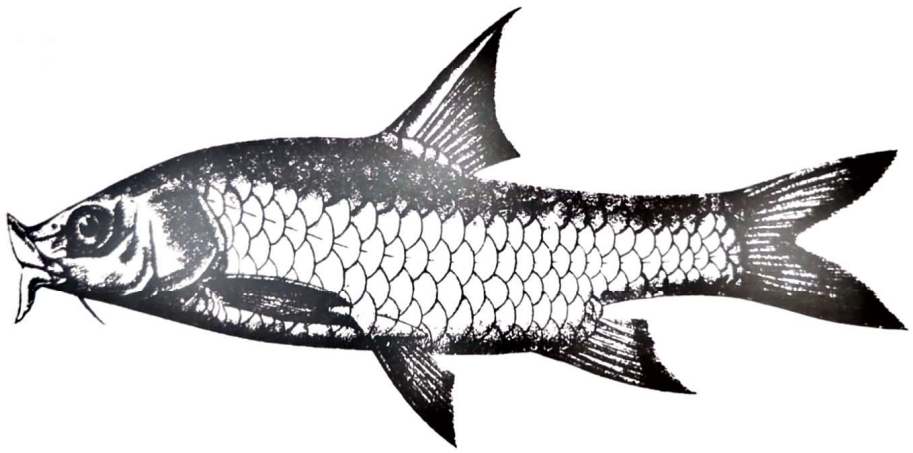
So it was — with memories of the Stour and the carp ponds of my youth growing dimmer by the day — that the world this side of the looking-glass once again dissolved. But with my mind focused on the predators beyond the river's surface, I

forgot the fearful symmetry of this place. Other predators, behind me, were going about their stealthy business.

It was during my brief visit that the first of Corbett Park's tigers turned man-eater. One of the mahouts went gathering fodder for his mount one day and failed to return. A search-party found his shin-bone and hands four miles from where he had been working. I was told to vacate my tent and move into a hut. The tiger was identified and captured but there have been other attacks on humans since.

One of the consequences, I am told, is that one is no longer allowed to fish this stretch of the Ramganga independently (just in occasional, closely supervised groups, if recent rumour is true, with forest guards riding shotgun). Once again I had been lucky enough to enjoy an incomparable angling experience in its last days.

But although the mahseer of Corbett Park might now be angling history, what I learnt from them was to prove of immense value four years on, when I returned to do battle with their monstrous hump-backed cousins in the South.



**Chapter Seven**

# Shadow across the Sun

Paul Boote

Heavy Mahseer fishing is the privilege and good fortune of a select few;
indeed, there must be few anglers in India, who would need more than five fingers
to count the fish they have caught over 50 lbs.

A. St J. MacDonald, *Circumventing the Mahseer* (1948)

You can recreate
what you love only by giving it up.

Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1927)

If my life were to go suddenly and horribly awry and I found it necessary to seek solace somewhere far from the source of my troubles, you would probably find me in southern India. On a remote beach at first perhaps, watching the sun sink over the Arabian Sea from a grass hut beneath the palms, a finished plate of locally caught lobster pushed to one side of the rattan table, a glass of coconut fenny in my hand. Then later, as my spirits rose, living in a tent pitched on another sandy beach, beside a river, where I could just sit quietly and watch the fluted trunks of the *muthhi* trees on the opposite bank blaze silver in the new morning light. And later still, when fully restored — the forgiving and the forgetting done — I would take up a rod again and make my way across to the rapids, to pitch a bait at the monsters that I know to occupy certain holts there among the roaring fury of the water as it encounters the ancient rocks of Karnataka. There, I have told you my secret. I must proceed with care.

It was the mahseer, of course, that lured me south: the great mahseer of the Kaveri River, fish which have tested the tackle, skill and physical endurance of visiting anglers for well over a century. I first fished the river in 1979, and so powerful was the experience that in each of the three following years I returned to take up the challenge once more. Later, when my attention was drawn and regrettably held elsewhere, Jeremy continued the quest. As we consulted our respective journals before writing these chapters, we found, to our astonishment, that we had spent a total of eight and a half months beside the river, fishing — just fishing. That is a lot of days. Days in which we both met with triumph and disaster, saw modest hopes dashed and the most unlikely of dreams come true. We can only convey something of the magic, and of the misery, by presenting a series of

snapshots: a few in sepia, most in burned-out colour; images from those periods spent beneath the searching gaze of a tropical sun.

The Kaveri — or Cauvery when anglicized — is a short river by Indian standards: a mere 475 miles from a source on the crest of the Western Ghats, just thirty miles from the Arabian Sea, to the river's mouth on the east coast, where it enters the Indian Ocean. It is one of the holy rivers of India. A temple stands close to the source at Talakaveri in the district of Coorg; Hindus pray here to Kaveri, the river goddess, make offerings of fruit and flowers, and gaze in awe at the sacred mahseer which cruise a nearby pool. (Strictly no fishing here, please. Don't even think about it!) The waters of the Kaveri, repeatedly impounded for irrigation and shot through generator turbines along their course, are the life-blood of the region. The progressive Wadeyar Maharajas of the princely state of Mysore (which was incorporated into the great new State of Karnataka in 1967) were initiators of India's first hydroelectric scheme in 1902. The schemes have brought many benefits, taking power to outlying hamlets and providing water to grow staple crops in a rich red earth, where formerly only dust prevailed. As befits a river of the South, its character is placid: at times almost sedate in comparison with the brawling bully-boys of the north. But that is not to say it is a lazy river — far from it. It just knows when to exert itself: like flinging itself 320 feet off the Mysore Plateau at the Sivasamudram Falls. And when to take it easy: spreading out luxuriantly below a short sharp rapid into a lake-like pool at least a mile in length and a couple of hundred yards wide between white sand beaches that would be the envy of many a seaside resort. A lovely river, a big river by any standard, but, to my mind, still an unlikely setting for the tale I am about to tell.

The legend of the monsters of the South had its origin back in 1871, with the capture of a fish that became known as 'Sanderson's Fish'. Its captor, G.P. Sanderson, author of the book *Thirteen Years Among the Wild Beasts of India*, though a tireless hunter, was no angler. That year, however, he took a five-foot-long fish on a nightline from a tributary of the Kaveri. His game trackers, local men, informed him that this type of fish was called *billi-meenu* in their tongue: literally, the silver fish. Sanderson, not a man to hide his light under a bushel, immediately splashed the story to the angling fraternity and created quite a stir. The fish at once confirmed the many unsubstantiated reports of a little-known southern variety of mahseer which grew to enormous size. An account of the leviathan duly appeared in Thomas's *The Rod in India*. I had learned from a correspondent in India that the fish's remains were still to be found in Bangalore City Museum. I looked them up on my arrival in Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka, in late 1978.

I had seen photographs of these southern giants prior to our departure, but nothing had prepared me for the shock of seeing one in the flesh — albeit a somewhat desiccated specimen, well past its view-by date. Sanderson's Fish lay splayed upon a mounting-board: a skin of huge scales, faded yellowish-white, trailing brittly behind a colossal head. I knew then why, in the North, this fish had

been given the name *mahseer*, a composite of two ancient Sanskrit words: *maha* — great, *siras* — head. The mouth alone of the massive head which lay before me had in life possessed an internal circumference of twenty-four inches. Sixty inches was the total body length at the time of capture, and thirty-eight the girth. Sanderson, lacking a balance on which to hang the fish, estimated its weight to be one hundred and fifty pounds. For years afterwards, a controversy alternately raged and simmered about the exact weight of the beast. Anglers can be a pedantic and unimaginative lot, arguing bitterly over fractions of an inch, or ounce, in quite ludicrous fashion; behaving like the worst sort of art buff, who stands before a masterpiece quite capable of transforming his life, seeing in the work only its current market value. Sanderson's mahseer did not weigh 150 pounds — but does that really matter? It is still a *monster*. A fish of the imagination made real. Its capture rocked the Indian sporting world in the 1870s and began a splendid tradition of freshwater big-game fishing in southern India that I was to discover more than a century later. That fish certainly did weigh every ounce of a hundred pounds. In such exceptional circumstances, what is a mere fifty pounds between friends?

Legends examined in the harsh light of reality are apt to disappoint. *Barbus tor mussulah*, the South Indian mahseer, is a notable exception. If ever there was a candidate certain to win a public-relations-industry prize for being the most marketable, user-friendly, potentially cuddly and best-looking fish — the fish par excellence, the one you all will love — then this is it. There is, in its vastness, something endearing about the creature; it at once attracts and wins people's affections. But here the superficial niceness, at least for the anglers who try to catch it, ends. The *mussulah* mahseer, designed and constructed on nothing less than the epic scale, is in my opinion one of the most powerful and hardest-fighting fish that swims. Such a formidable adversary indeed, that the very act of fishing for it can be fraught with danger. I do not jest. In all of the world's freshwaters, the fish has only one rival: another mahseer, its rangier counterpart in northern India. In light of such an extravagant claim, perhaps a closer look at the southern fish is called for.

A gracefully curving back; a heavy, ponderous shoulder (the 'bullock-shouldered mahseer', old-timers once called it); a massive head; broad, hard flanks, clad in a mail-coat of huge, shimmering scales; a set of large spoon-like fins that includes a great tail: were an artist to incorporate these individual features into an identikit impression of the fish, I fear the completed image would closely resemble the outcome of one of Dr Frankenstein's less successful experiments. Left to itself, however, Nature has done rather better. Undeniably it is a very different animal from the *putitora* subspecies of the Himalaya: a deeper-bodied, more carp-like creature; handsome certainly, though often criticized by north Indian anglers for its heavier-set — they say, 'portly' — appearance.

(Such criticism is a by-product of a North-South divide: a three-thousand-year-old echo of the fair-skinned Aryan conqueror dismissing the physical and intellectual

attributes of the original inhabitants of India, the darker-skinned Dravidian people, confined in defeat to the lands south of the Godaveri River. In both cases the criticism is unjustified; though some comments about the fish — 'Looking like that, they have no right to be in a river!' — and the blimpish manner of their delivery have, on occasion, compelled this listener to turn away and chew his hand or shirt collar, in an effort to suppress the fit of giggles that suddenly threatened to overwhelm him. The earnest bigot is, I find, among other things, often very amusing.)

The physical proportions of the southern mahseer, like those of human beings, vary greatly from individual to individual: from the grossly obese specimen, to the lanky, gangling creature ever possessed of a surfeit of energy. Habitat appears to play a part in this. The fatties tend to snuffle around the depths of sluggish pools, whilst their more athletic cousins are constantly going for it amidst the hurly-burly of the rapids. This, of course, is only a generalization. In reality, both kinds of fish are to be found in both types of water.

In my series of articles for *Angling* magazine years ago, following the teachings of a number of experienced South Indian anglers, I blithely stated that *mussulah* came in three colours: silver, gold and black. And so it does — but I have since found that it comes in many more: the variations are seemingly endless. It was on a successful day during my second visit to the Kaveri that the following scene took place. I had just landed a mahseer with standard-issue bronze-green back, heliograph-silver flanks and bright-orange fins, edged in white on their trailing edges.

'Silver mahseer,' I casually observed to Suban, my local guide and staunch ally in many a past battle with big fish.

'Gold mahseer, Paul.' he replied quietly, with the merest hint of disdain, enough to let me know he felt that I really should know better by now.

Next came a fish with the same back coloration, bronze-green, which persisted down the flanks to meet a cream-coloured belly from which sprouted fins of a most delicate coral-pink hue.

'Silver?' I hazarded. (It looked more like bronze to me.)

'Gold,' was the terse reply. He looked away upstream, eyes unfocused.

Unlike Henry Ford's Model T, these southern mahseer appeared to come in almost any colour, including black. I vowed to give up classifying fish in such arbitrary fashion. From now on, it would not matter to me what colour a fish was, just as long as it was a mahseer — and a good one at that.

A brief round-up of possibilities is really the best I can do in the circumstances. Fins: white, light grey, powdery carnation-pink, pale coral-pink, bright orange (tipped or not tipped/edged in white — or pale grey), reddish-orange, blood-red, slate-grey, black — and bronze-green, this being the same colour as most backs, which vary considerably in the darkness of their shading but can also appear from time to time in slate-grey, silver-grey, brown, brownish green and black. Flanks come in a choice of bronze, silver, black, brownish black and mixed shades of all

these colours. Black mahseer are rare and quite unmistakable. If you catch one and are then told it is a silver mahseer, throw your informant into the river.

* * *

Rivers mean different things to different people. Anglers profess to love them. Like smitten teenagers we adore their every curve and dimple, tolerate their moods and shortcomings, remember them when we're far away, come back to them when wiser counsel suggests we leave and not return. We can recite the names of settlements along their banks in almost reverential tones: Chilbolton, Wherwell, Mottisfont, Stockbridge, Leckford — names of places beside Hampshire's River Test — a chalkstream troutfisher's litany. I have fished just one of these but I know them all, intimately. Fireside nights spent with the books of Hills, Plunkett-Green, Skues and Halford have transported me to this lovely river, upon whose banks I have walked and fished — in the imagination, at least. (In that halcyon age, only the great and the good were welcome. It was probably a touch miffed Edwardian gentleman who first observed that even God himself would experience difficulty in getting to fish the Test unless he had been at school with the right man, and then only if their respective sets of parents knew each other socially.) Every river casts its particular spell. I am passionately involved with at least a dozen; the Kaveri is one of them.

Krishnarajasagar, Srirangapatna, Sivasamudram and Sangama are to the Kaveri what Chilbolton, Wherwell and the others are to the Test: names on a river's Roll of Honour. And whilst they may scramble the brain in our efforts to pronounce them and lie far off amidst the lion-coloured hills of southern India, I feel they warrant any angler's attention and respect, for the history of their fishings is awesome. In the one hundred and twenty years since the capture of Sanderson's Fish, the Kaveri river system has yielded many great mahseer: fifteen one-hundred-pounders on rod and line to my knowledge (at time of printing), and thousands more fish of between fifty and ninety-odd pounds. It was in the first fifty years of this century that the fishing enjoyed its heyday, when European anglers residing in old Mysore State, equipped with modern tackle, hooked into a succession of monsters and managed to land them. One of these fish, a 108-pounder, nevertheless still took four and a half hours to subdue. The family name of one group of Kaveri anglers stands pre-eminent, that of the Van Ingens of Mysore.

The Van Ingens, as superb taxidermists, were to Indian *shikar* (hunting and shooting) what the firm of Rowland Ward once was to East African big game. If an animal had to be preserved and mounted, it was a foolish person who did not immediately despatch a telegram south, simply addressed: 'Van Ingen, Mysore'. Whereas visiting Viceroys, Commissioners and other very important persons would descend upon the river from time to time for a bit of light relief from their duties, the Van Ingens — father Eugene and sons Joubert and J. de Wet — took their fishing seriously, as their results over the years show: seventy-, eighty-, ninety- and even

one-hundred-pound mahseer fell to the rods of the Van Ingen family with amazing regularity. In March 1946 whilst fishing the Kabini, a Kaveri tributary that rarely exceeded forty yards in width, J. de Wet Van Ingen hooked and landed a giant of one hundred and twenty pounds. It remains the All-India Rod-Caught Record Mahseer to this day. The photograph of that great fish renders any further comment on my part superfluous — well, almost....

If there was a talisman that sustained and drove me through the many months of travel and fishing in India over the years, then it was the image of Van Ingen's mahseer. In the early days I dreamt of bettering it — breaking the record — but soon realized, for a host of reasons, that this ambition forever had to remain a dream. Instead, the fish served as a constant reminder to me that what I was experiencing was not only sensational, but unique. If at any time I detected in myself signs of becoming just a little too damn cocksure or blasé, a glance at that old photograph would teach me an immediate and much needed lesson in humility, make me appreciate just what I had, and urge me to make the best of the privilege while I still could.

* * *

The city, and with it the twentieth century, receded fast. After a few miles the bus slowed to greet the first envoys of village India: fine southern cattle, long swept-back horns pale-blue-painted and tipped with small brass bells, looking altogether more worthy of reverence than their northern cousins. We rumbled on, through mud-brick villages populated by handsome, slender, dark-skinned people; children waved vigorously, teeth agleam in smiles; bright-saried women with flowers in their hair looked up from domestic chores at well-swept, beaten-earth-and-cowdung doorsteps; men wobbled erratically by on bicycles; goats reared and tupped in listless play. Above, the brazen disc of the sun fixed all with a look of merciless intensity; below, the heat throbbed.

The irrigation system, creator of this rural order, failed as we neared our destination (ironically, its source), the river. The landscape at once became harsh and arid; enormous granite outcrops, like African kopje, punctuated fields of shattered rock and baked earth in which only thorns could grow. The appearance of agave cactus and prickly-pear did it for me: from that moment, I expected a party of hopelessly lost Cherokee to appear from behind a high ridge and race, whooping, across the sere plain towards us. They never did. At every predicted point of ambush the country softened and, from behind a veil of dust and heat-haze, a settlement would appear, located beside the essential village tank — a water-hyacinth-choked lake, complete with wallowing water-buffalo plus attendant egrets, and coot or purple gallinule making jaunty progress across beds of flowering lily. Occasionally a lusty splash, or set of ever-widening rings far out on the sunlit mirror of the surface, informed the observer of the presence of fish: carp, *mirgal*, *rohu* and *catla*, the latter

two each capable of reaching a hundred pounds. The bus, in a fit of uncontrolled rattling, moved ever on.

A billow of round-topped hills now extended across the southern horizon. Our new friend, a local farmer, sinewy and gap-toothed, gesticulated at them and said, 'Kaveri! Kaveri!' Irregular smiles were exchanged and hands pumped with politicians' fervour. A set of hairpin bends led us down through the brown hills, the road levelling as it reached the valley floor. A banana plantation, some distant magnate's, was passed. It lay behind a fence of granite posts and wire which appeared capable of stopping an elephant. Later we learned that this was its exact purpose. The bus shuddered to a halt in the village. We clambered out into the white heat of the early afternoon. The Kaveri ran in lively rock-strewn rapids before us. I felt as if I had come home.

The four of us stood in the shade of a tamarind tree at the centre of a sandy clearing on the edge of the riverine forest. There was an uneasy silence. The river guards, Suban and Krishna, eyed the pile of sacks, bags, cardboard boxes and lone rod tube which we had just lugged two miles along a rough, stony track from the bus. I sensed they were not impressed. They had been told of a great English fisherman arriving in the village that day, who intended to stay and fish the river for two months. They had guided some other foreigners the previous year and these had lived up to expectations: air-conditioned Land Rover, water filters, gun, plenty of beer, and enough fishing tackle to stock a shop. But this — a young long-haired man, a mere slip of a girl and a miserable array of dust-besmirched provisions — surely not....

My old school attempted to mould me into a leader of men. It failed: some character disorder on my part always prevented me from tolerating for long any form of institutionalized discipline and esprit de corps. But if ever there was a time to rally the troops around the flag, then this was it. The two men had to understand from the outset that we were here for the duration and meant business — or we were lost. I laid into the pile of baggage and began to unroll the store tent, a much holed ex-army eighty-pounder, which we had scrounged from someone's rat-infested garage back in the city. The guards leapt to my assistance and soon the three of us had the tent erected beneath a huge muthhi (*Terminalia tomentosa*), as Anita rifled through the cooking equipment, found the primus stove and began to make tea. She never completed the task. Suban dismissed her politely from the field kitchen and minutes later the four of us sat about the first vestiges of our month-long home, grinning at one another, glasses of tea in hand. From the moment I lifted a finger to help myself, and was seen to be capable of doing things within their particular sphere of expertise in competent fashion, I had won the guards' respect. In the weeks that followed they became our friends and allies.

* * *

Sundar Raj, one of the best fishermen I have known, gave me this recipe for *ragi* paste. Ragi, by the way, is a millet, an important staple in the diet of Karnataka.

4kg ragi flour. Add water and mix in bucket to make stiff paste.
Add 25g of *somph* (fennel seed).
Add 25g of cardamom. Mix thoroughly.
Knead paste into balls the shape and size of a hen's egg.
Steam or boil for 20 minutes until baits are hard-skinned.
To test: throw one at a rock — if it bounces off, it's done.

To the British carp angler this concoction might seem pretty small beer, for in the last decade the making of designer baits for carp, that most fickle of fish, has boldly gone into realms of advanced chemistry and nutrition that I, a scientific illiterate, can no longer follow. However, when you learn that this recipe is at least two hundred years old, you begin to understand the truth in the saying, 'There is nothing new under the sun.' South Indian fishermen have for centuries used strongly spiced and flavoured, hard, paste baits to attract the great mahseer of the Kaveri River.

I like bait-fishing. I grew up watching a float or nodding rod-tip. I enjoy feeling the bump of a lead or plink of shot as a bait journeys through an unseen, yet richly imagined, aquatic landscape. In my opinion, a master bait-fisher who focuses his attention upon a new discipline, the fly or spinner, will often outperform long-term practitioners of either school. Bait-fishing, at its best, is a multidimensional exercise requiring as much mental activity as it does a sensitive pair of hands. At its worst, it is the nearest thing to living death I know. Bait-fishing is whatever an angler cares to make of it: a tedious, sedentary affair; or a roving, prospecting and locating exercise in which success is won through the deployment of rivercraft and an intimate knowledge of your quarry. As an active person who hates to sit around and wait for things to happen, I had mixed feelings about the forthcoming angling scenario.

Suban and Krishna insisted that I address the two fine pools below the camp in the old style: a six-day prebaiting campaign with balls of ragi paste prior to commencing fishing. I acceded to their wish. In these early days my main concern was fish on the bank — ethics and finesse could come later. Besides, it would be an interesting historical exercise, re-enacting what visiting dignitaries had had done for them by a legion of retainers prior to their arrival on the river many years before. Each morning at dawn, eighty to a hundred balls of bait (some ten to fourteen pounds of paste) were heaved into a selected area of each pool. In one, this meant a clearly visible 'crease', where a fast current from a rapid above ripped past the slower, contrary current of a back-eddy. In the other, it was a table of smooth, gliding water at the point where two tongues of current met, fifty yards below a large rocky island in the centre of the river. No fishing whatsoever was to be conducted in the baited area until six days had elapsed. On the seventh day, an hour *after* the customary dawn feeding time, I would fish.

'Full standing water!' Krishna exclaimed excitedly on our first feeding sortie to the

island tail, 'Big silver mahseer!' I nodded my head and forced a smile. I would believe it when I saw one.

The week passed, with elephant and monkey trouble as our main diversions. A big male bonnet-macaque monkey broke into the store tent one morning, ransacked my pack, found a 1,000-metre spool of fishing line and proceeded to entangle himself in most of it. With a sack over his head to mask the wicked teeth, and the judicious use of scissors, we freed him. He ran one way and we the other. Both parties turned and indulged in a mutual snarling session at the safe distance of about forty yards. The nights were spent defending ourselves against large deputations from India's 18,000-strong elephant population. Our camp, it seemed, was positioned on the exact route the herds took to reach the river on their nightly watering forays. The progress of these herds through the forest could only be likened to a line of earthmovers rumbling forward on full throttle, oblivious to what lay before them. Trees cracked and crashed in spectacular fashion. Some mornings we expected to wake up in a state of cartoon-character flatness; but of course we survived to tell the tale.

In the meantime, the groundbait went into the river and I awaited my appointment with *mussulah* with increasing trepidation. Rods appeared from the tube, reels from the pack, and both were duly inspected by the guards and greatly approved of. Their estimation of me increased daily. One afternoon, Suban picked up the heavy rod from against the trunk of the muthhi beside the store tent, looked over at me, and nodded in the direction of the river a hundred yards away.

'Fishing, sir,' he said. It was not so much an enquiry or suggestion, as a polite order. Apart from a few sessions of tiddler-snatching in the margins of the pool at bathtime each morning and late afternoon, I had not bothered to fish. The set piece on day seven was a big enough prospect. I abandoned my book nevertheless. He handed me the rod and we made our way down to the beach where the coracle was moored.

'Chilwa fishing, sir,' he explained in his very limited English. 'Big mahseer — broken water.' We communicated in this way, in broken English, Hindi and sign language (with often hilarious results) throughout our four-year association.

He produced the largest hook in my box, a 7/0, a real meat-hook, and indicated that I tie it on. I did so. A coil of sheet lead, weighing perhaps half an ounce was wound onto the line a couple of feet above. In the seep water at the bottom of the coracle a few small fish swam. These were our chilwa: in everyday Indian fishing parlance, the name of any small fish suitable for use as mahseer bait.

'Live chilwa for mahseer, Suban?' I enquired as casually as possible, for I detested livebait fishing.

'Live chilwa best, sir,' he replied, as he pushed off across the pool towards the funnel at the tail, and the heave of white water and rocks beyond.

'Dead chilwa okay, Suban?' I persisted.

'Okay sir,' he replied, non-committally.

I would fish deadbait. I had wished to avoid being seen to wimp out over impaling a small live fish through the back with a hook — the local custom.

As the smooth, tapering tongue of water fell, it broke into a vicious rapid, hit a big black boulder the size of a small car in midstream, then completely lost its head.

'Fish *here?*' I asked incredulously.

'Big fish, sir,' he replied, with the slightest nod.

I killed a small carp, slid the hook-point through the root of its tail and squared up to the maelstrom before me. Suban pointed to the midstream rock. A bulging cushion of water rhythmically rose and fell at its upstream edge. I had noted the place on our arrival, but had not believed that any fish would entertain the idea of living there. Suban thought otherwise. I lobbed the bait twenty yards to the crest of the rapid above; it cartwheeled down through the churning water and came to rest in the comparative calm before the rock.

At that very instant something monstrous hit the bait. It dragged the rod over. I was pulled to my knees, gashing them badly. The reel screamed. I hollered in unison. Suban snatched the rod from me a split second before I was about to be pulled in. I scrambled to my feet. He handed back the rod. A dubious gift. The reel, out of necessity, was now in free spool, for the line was around the central rock and the fish running hard downstream. It stopped only when it had cleared the reel of the remaining 230 yards of line. At this point I glanced at the spool; my thumb, now resting on the drum-knot, lacked a covering of skin. I began to hurt.

Then absolute mayhem broke out. Suban was bellowing to Krishna back in camp two hundred yards away. A figure appeared from out of the trees, sprinted across the white sand towards us, arrived at the water's edge and, without a second's hesitation, dived in and swam straight down the pool. Suban danced across the rocks to reach the coracle moored at the head of the rapid. Krishna, yelling something to him as he reached the pool tail, entered the great water-chute and was swept down the rapids towards me. I could not believe what I was seeing. His head appeared in the bulge of water before the rock, there was a flurry of limbs and in a few seconds he had clambered upon it.

*'Line! Line! Rod! Rod!'* he yelled at me above the river-roar, his face horribly contorted.

I raised the rod. He groped for the line along the base of the rock, found it, lifted it up and over his head, then released it downstream. I was now in direct contact with the fish two hundred and fifty yards below. At the same moment, Suban shot the rapids in the coracle and paddled frantically across the enraged water to where I stood. I clambered in and, with Krishna swimming after us in pursuit, we set off to take the fight to the fish in the channel far below.

After an hour Suban went quiet. We had joked about whales and submarines at first, as we were towed back and forth across the river by our unseen adversary. A little later, even the chatty Krishna lapsed into silence. I knelt on the bamboo-strip basket of the coracle floor, in agony: my knees stung, my lacerated thumb throbbed,

a dull ache came from the pit of my stomach where the rod butt was jammed, my shoulder and neck muscles had locked due to the pressure I was compelled to exert upon the fish. We were back in the coracle again, after an attempt to play it from the bank a while before had resulted in another scorching run and a near-emptied reel. The fish swam slowly now, ten feet down, towing us where it willed. It was tiring. We bade our time.

Suban at last broke the silence.

'Very big fish, sir. Fifty kay-gee.'

Krishna nodded vigorously in confirmation.

After an hour and forty minutes the fish ran a little way upstream under ridiculously heavy pressure, then went solid. We positioned ourselves immediately above it, and I heaved. It was immovable, snagged in a maze of ledges and boulders below. I pulled for a break.

We had never seen the fish: not even the briefest glimpse of a tail cleaving the surface. Suban put his hand on my shoulder then, the only physical contact he allowed in all the time I knew him. We exchanged grim smiles. I think we both knew.

* * *

I sat warming myself beside the embers of the previous night's fire. It was not yet dawn. I had slept badly — so badly that Anita, in the interests of my safety, had evicted me from our tent a short while before. Day seven had come at last. I was all ajitter: if another mahseer meted out to me the same sort of punishment as the first, then birdwatching seemed a more attractive leisure prospect.

I watched the inky, star-filled night lighten by degrees into a wash of grey shadows. The odours of woodsmoke, moist earth and vegetation filled the cool still air. The only sound was the muffled roar of the rapids downstream. A sudden crack of timber from the same direction betrayed the presence of a tardy elephant, beating a hasty retreat back to the hills before the sun crested the ridge behind the camp. And when it did, the corresponding ridge on the hillside across the river at once was bathed in gold and the formerly leaden surface of the pool below splashed with silver. A breeze stirred with the rising of the sun. Above me, a few leaves rustled crisply; among them a crow began its tuneless day-long chorus. The guards muttered from their sleeping quarters in the store tent. I retied the hook- and leader-knots on the heavy rod for the third time and poured myself a fourth glass of tea. This prisoner at least would go to the scaffold having eaten a hearty breakfast.

At the water's edge we assembled: Anita with a camera, book, washbag and towel; me with a rod; Suban with a coracle paddle; and Krishna with a gunny sack of bait. Anita and I sat apart. I watched Suban bale the coracle and Krishna fashion a dozen or so fist-sized balls of bait from a three-pound slab of lightly steamed ragi paste. (The softer paste would allow a hook to pull out of the bait when tightening

*Krishna's rock, showing the table of water where the monster was waiting*

into a fish.) At the tail of the island across the river, carp rose and dimpled the surface of the mingling streams. I looked across to Anita and broke the silence.

'Sorry about all the disturbance last night, Nita. I was worried about ...' I gestured at the river with the sweep of an arm.

'That's all right,' she said, volunteering a weak smile. 'Are you okay now? You don't *have* to fish, you know.'

'I have to — I must — after all this preparation. Anyway, Suban says that heavy feeding doesn't always work ...'

'*What?* But he said to me "certain fish" the other day, Paul!' She was furious. 'Surely we've not sat here and been half roasted alive for a week, for nothing?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I just don't know what is going to happen, I ...'

'You'll probably hook a ragi ball,' she said with certain finality, then looked away.

I looked at her. A corner of the mouth quivered. A sun-freckled cheek tightened and creased in the act of suppression. She turned towards me, eyes bright with tears. I pulled a face. Her laughter burst into the fresh, clear air of the morning; my own, an instant later. Krishna looked up from the bait and smiled at me, nervously. Suban, inscrutable as ever, stood awaiting my presence in the coracle. I took Anita's hand, gave it a peremptory squeeze, then turned away to meet my fate upon the island.

I caught absolutely nothing that morning — except a little too much sun.

My reprieve was short-lived. They found me. Twenty- and thirty-pounders at first, astonishing in their fighting verve, thoroughbred racers every one. The two forty-pounders I hooked were clearly still in the throes of their respective mid-life crises. Both refused to accept my very reasonable contention that, in view of the fact they

were no longer twenty, they should behave in a manner more befitting a creature in its middle years. 'Loosen up,' I said, 'take it easy.' They argued their case strenuously, at great length, and with impeccable logic. I had to become quite insistent. We discussed the matter further on the bank and agreed to differ, amicably. Hard cases, forty-pounders — at least the pair I caught, at forty-two and forty-eight pounds.

Then, even bigger fish appeared: two at exactly sixty pounds (one of them from the island tail, hooked — if memory serves — when two people on the riverbank were in the throes of yet another lovers' tiff) and an absolute beauty, a real heart breaker of seventy-five pounds. She — all the great mahseer are females — all but pulled my arms off for half an hour before running upstream into the rapids, and attempted to cruise through them, passing Krishna's rock, to reach the pool above. She very nearly made it. The chute stopped her and in turn delivered her to my feet, where two men groaned as they took the weight and roared in triumph as they laid her gently on the bank. The date was February 5th 1979. I find myself writing these words on February 5th 1991. She is probably still alive — twenty, thirty, even forty pounds heavier perhaps — setting her great, bronze shoulder against the rush of the rapids most afternoons in search of fish. I'd love to see her again.

* * *

At dawn we set off for the narrow gorge the villagers called the Goat's Leap. Suban wheeled an ancient bicycle which would speed our return journey in the great heat. We walked in silence along the track at the base of the forested hillside. Across the valley floor to our right, the river hurried noisily through a maze of rock channels: the home of huge fish which, according to my companion, knew how to use these wild waters to their best advantage and were virtually impossible to land. We walked on.

The first birds were about. A nightjar, a bundle of dowdy feathers nestling half-asleep upon the track, was reluctant to seek cover as we came up to it. Further on, a spurfowl strutted away more smartly. Then the garrulous, hoarse-throated crowing of a grey jungle fowl came from a scrubby thicket in the forest close by. Suban halted. A few years before, he had shot these birds with muzzle-loading gun and catapult, or had ingeniously trapped them. In those days they were worth all his efforts; for these (the male birds at least) are the famous Jungle Cock, whose neck feathers are much prized by anglers around the world for the adornment of sea trout and salmon flies. Suban had sold the patches of skin bearing the enamelled black, yellow and white 'eye' feathers to an itinerant trader, who in turn sold them to a man in the city who smuggled them abroad hidden in consignments of handicrafts. A ban on the export and import of Sonnerat's Grey Jungle Fowl feathers in India, Europe and America, together with improved customs surveillance, had put paid to my friend's enterprise. I was happy for the many birds saved, but not for him: as a villager who

must harvest the river's and the forest's bounty in order to survive, he was the loser.

Further along the track, we came upon a section of clear-felled forest. A twenty-foot-wide strip ran from where we stood at the base of the steep hillside to its topmost ridge. In any other place it might have been a fire-break but in this remote, unmanaged forest, it most certainly was not. The scar was fresh: the work of chainsaws, not villagers' hand-saws and axes. It disturbed me. I looked enquiringly at Suban.

'MPC — Mysore Power Corporation. Hydel. Big dam,' he said. He pointed upstream. 'Big lake. Twenty — thirty kilometres standing water. No river. No village.' There was bitterness in his voice. He turned downstream and pointed at the opposing valley-sides with his arms held outstretched.

'Dam. Power house. Many people building two years. Bombing. No mahseer. Finish.' No actor could simulate the look of disgust, world-weariness and confusion that racked his face.

I stood there for a few seconds, uncomprehending and numb, before the hot wave of anger swept over me. They had found this place. Nowhere was safe now.

'Let's go,' I said, turning on my heel. He nodded. We walked back to camp in silence, each with his own thoughts.

* * *

A year had passed. The dam was still only a rumour, yet there had been changes in the valley. The electricity supply, formerly a single, bulbless socket dangling from a length of flex on the travellers' bungalow veranda, had been connected. It had required a minor VIP (an especially Indian phenomenon) to travel from the city, make a speech and perform a switch-throwing ceremony. With this done and the official safely departed, the bulb was removed and no further evidence of the miracle of electric light seen hereabouts for several months. Now, the bulb glowed dimly of an evening and a few villagers still came just to sit and look at it; their turn would come.

A road had been built beside the river. The ancient track along which we had often toiled — on foot and by bullock cart — had been levelled and graded and marker stones placed at every kilometre. Now called a jeep road, it led from exactly nowhere ... to nowhere. The village people seldom used it, still preferring the narrow foot trails across the hills. The sandalwood poachers actually despised the innovation: laden with their bundles of wood cut from trees felled at dead of night, they were naturally anxious to avoid detection by the forest guards who might now use it. (The precious essential oil derived from sandalwood is an ingredient in a number of fine perfumes. It is with regrettable infrequency that I find myself in situations that allow me to experience the oil's heady assault upon the senses at first hand; but when I do, I remember — for a moment or two at least — its origins in the southern forests.) Aside from these symbols of an outside world, little had

changed. The hills were perhaps more barren this year due to light winter rains; a bankside tree had gone here, a boulder shifted there ... mere trifles. I was thrilled to be back.

On the first day I wrote the following piece in my journal:

> The midday heat lies fat and heavy upon the earth. Intermittently a fiery wind funnels down the valley from the mouth of a furnace somewhere in the hills upriver. It is an unreasoning, debilitating heat, that strikes you first a sickening body-blow, then licks you with a rasping, tiger's tongue, flaying and searing your skin, leaving it dull and worryingly lifeless by day's end. You see yourself ageing fast. The sun is pitiless. Beyond the tiny pool of shade in which you cower, all is glare: blinding vistas of sand bleached bone-white and forest colour cooked into monochrome. Cicadas shrill and shove at you with their throbbing chorus. The brain-fever bird shrieks in ever-ascending pitch. You feel alternately lethargic, alternately suicidal. Sit quietly. Pretend to read a book or tinker with some tackle. Don't look up. He tries this every day, tries to drive you off so you won't be present later to see the valley slip off her dowdy day-dress and go bathing, naked and breathtakingly lovely, in the amber evening light. Be patient. She will be there, waiting for you at the river's edge, when you go down to fish.

I had forgotten how much this place once meant to me.

On the second day, over breakfast, we learned from one of our party that there was to be a total solar eclipse the same afternoon. ('It won't happen again,' he said. 'Not in any of our lifetimes.') Having discovered that a near-perfect sighting of the event was going to be possible from this South Indian location, the man had packed a few pieces of smoked glass in his holiday luggage. After lunch, we made ourselves comfortable and waited.

At two-thirty, the bright sky began to pale and thicken; as if a hand had reached up and was now, degree by degree, ever so slowly turning a dimmer-switch. The subtlety of the transformation brought to mind memories of evenings at the cinema when I was a teenager — of how, as the auditorium lights went down and I sensed the light around me begin to fade, I could never fix the precise moment at which the light went completely until I had turned to my companion and found I could no longer recognize her face.

At three o'clock, as a pall of darkness devoured the sun, the birds stopped singing. Even the heavy-metal cicadas turned down their amps. We took it in turns to stare at the sun, through a glass, darkly; then, for perhaps half an hour, were embraced by a filthy, lowering light. We drank beer, drifted idly in and out of conversations, and browsed at books — ill-advised purchases from airport stalls. When the darkness gradually lifted so too did our sense of oppression. A man visiting the camp from the city, a angler of strong opinions formed by reading much and fishing little, informed us that, after this, the mahseer would be hot on the feed. Later, while fishing in a true dusk, we were hard put to catch three tiddlers.

Most afternoons I would steal away to a quiet part of the valley and just sit there, looking. Almost any subject would do. It might be a red-wattled lapwing flying upriver, ridiculous yet endearing with its *Did he do it? Did he do it?* call. Or a grazing-fire advancing steadily across a russet-hued hill named Thodnadaga, the Thigh Shaker. So called, the locals maintained, on account of the effects of its gradient upon the legs of the unpractised climber. (Later, I discovered the truth of this claim.) And then, of course, there was the river. I'd watch a seam of current trace a wayward course along a satiny glide, ease past a couple of midstream boulders with an enticing wriggle, straighten itself and regain a modicum of composure before reaching a straggle of rocks over which it bent gracefully, then fell in a flurry of white ribbons down to the pool below. I watched this spot for hours. There was something almost compulsive in the act of looking; as if I felt solace was to be found in these lovely waters and, if I stared at them long enough, they could heal an aching heart.

'Never go back,' my friends had said, 'and if you do, don't expect too much. It will not be the same. It never is.' I did not believe them. But they were — as friends so often are — absolutely right.

I really don't wish to talk about it in much detail. I'll bore you or invite comments from more heavily afflicted souls such as, 'And you think you've got problems! You would know what problems are if you had mine....' Nevertheless, I must say something about the shadow that had begun to drift across my own otherwise brilliant sun.

I had made a dreadful mistake: I had brought outsiders to the valley. Several months before, I had come to the conclusion that a low-profile fishing holidays operation could generate a much needed source of income for the local people — without any of the socially corrosive side-effects that normally follow on the heels of tourism. We would bring a few small groups of anglers to fish the river and in turn leave a scatter of footprints, a few mahseer with temporarily sore mouths, and a reserve of hard cash in the local economy as the only evidence of our stay. Krishna had left for the city a few months before, to take a job in a factory manufacturing nuts and bolts. With a wife and young family to support, village life for him had become an unprofitable luxury. We, however, could offer a lifeline to that fast-sinking vessel. I felt that Suban and Bola (Krishna's successor) and a locally recruited staff would benefit significantly from our ten-week presence beside the river each spring. I will say no more, except to remark that, although the guards now sported someone else's cast-off training shoes and T-shirt, Krishna with his modest city job was still far better off. Painful idealist that I am, this was why I had been staring at a lot of water recently. Clearly, my days in the tourist trade — and India — were numbered.

Suban and I left together on foot for the rapids shortly after lunch. We grinned at each other. We had an afternoon off from the not unpleasant, though sometimes

*What could she weigh now? A 75-pounder caught in 1979*

demanding task of guiding the small fishing party. It was just like old times. I had brought an extra rod. He would fish today and I'd take the soaking when he hooked one as I was still tying trace-knots.

We fished for deadbait at first. Inevitably, in our need to catch fish merely inches in length we could only land ones which were measured in pounds. It seemed that every toddler in the mahseer nursery was demanding its tea. An hour later the only bait in our possession was a Carnatic carp of almost three times the optimum size of six or seven ounces. It looked preposterous. We both giggled as I attempted to lift it with the rod prior to casting. And when it hit the surface of the run, the resulting splash and tidal wave provoked an attack of uncontrolled hysteria: I nearly dropped the rod, Suban all but fell in. The terminal-tackle thundered along the riverbed for a few yards before comprehensively snagging itself behind a midstream boulder. I feebly raised and lowered the rod-tip in an attempt to free it, imparting movement to the bait (which was not snagged) as I did so. I scratched the back of my head in embarrassment and looked quizzically at Suban. It was at this moment the mahseer took.

It was with a mixture of screams and yells of both laughter and pain, we played the fish for the next half-hour. This fish was deadly serious; and when I lost all the skin from my thumb, I was too. As the shadows lengthened and the hills glowed in warm shades of pink and purple, it finally surrendered: a great back broke the surface behind a flare of pectorals; a broom-head of a tail pulsed and quivered above the pewter-coloured water. Suban got in with the fish and carried her to the bank. A modest monster by Kaveri standards — a 'mere' forty-eight pounds — but one of the best fighters I have ever encountered and in circumstances I shall never forget. We started for home just as soon as Raju, the head river guard (who had appeared during the course of the fight), was satisfied with the photographs Suban and I were taking of him with the fish. We had to cross the river by coracle, next. That evening, I think I could have walked.

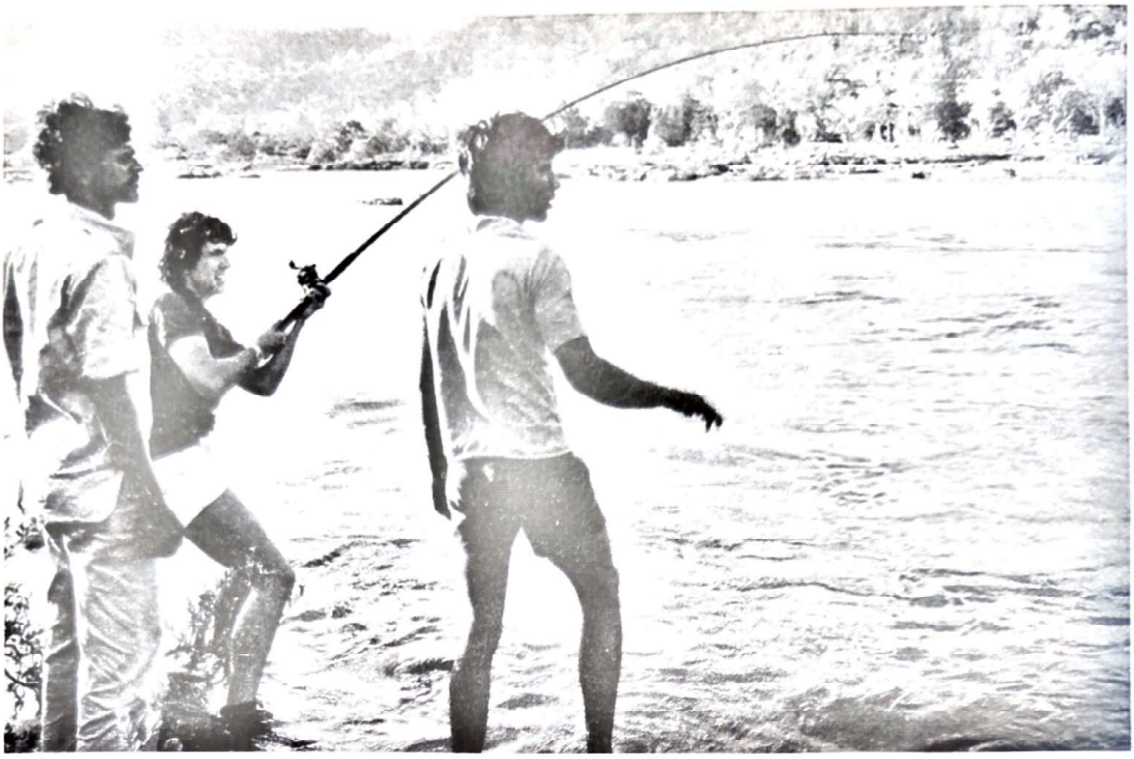
As we ambled contentedly along the jeep road in the twilight, the breeze stilled and the heat of day subsided fast. To describe the magic of a tropical evening is beyond my ability as a writer — besides, chapter length does not allow me even the luxury of trying. And I would be wasting my time anyway, for it is not so much what you see at this time, it is what you feel. I have seen men of sawn-plank sensitivity go strangely quiet in the dusk, heard their shoot-from-the-hip, no-nonsense philosophizing die on dry lips as they reached for a pocket handkerchief to blow a suddenly sniffly nose. I don't exactly know what causes this, but I think it should be available on prescription.

There was activity in the shawl of forest to our right: a babble of the Kannada tongue drifted through the trees; a pressure lamp hissed and roared into blazing life. A camp had been erected in the few hours since Suban and I had passed on our way upriver. I looked to him for enlightenment. He said just two words:

'Van Ingen.'

I halted, but at once felt inclined to walk on. The mahseer record holder, still alive and fishing — I felt like Stanley finding Livingstone. However, I would not presume upon Mr Van Ingen's evening; I would send a polite note tomorrow morning, to introduce myself and tentatively suggest a meeting. He was an elderly gentleman after all, and one, I had heard, who much valued his privacy. But Raju, imperious as ever, strode into that sandy clearing among the trees, with me in his train. Within a dozen paces we had entered Van Ingen's camp and stepped back sixty years in time.

Four men, whom I took to be servants, were occupied in putting the final touches to the *bandobast*: the all-important arrangements and organization. (Whatever you do in India, whether you are launching a business, celebrating a marriage or merely setting up camp, the bandobast must — in theory at least — be absolutely *pukka*: spot on.) The cook and his assistant peeled onions before the kitchen tent; another man took on the might of nature and swept the sand clear of leaves, thorns and muthhi seeds; a fourth unfolded a splendid antique camp-table and its matching set of chairs. Mr Van Ingen's rod box lay open outside his tent. A coracle rested against the fluted stem of a tree close by. But for a jeep parked at the road-side edge of the



*Krishna (left) and Sundar Raj watch a 68-pounder take 150 yards in its first rush*

clearing, I might have just walked into H.S. Thomas's fishing camp beside the upper Kaveri, not sixty, but a hundred years before. The men looked up from their duties. Raju addressed the cook, who replied with a gesture in the direction of the river. Raju, in turn, cursorily waved me in that direction and then — in Hindi, not their mutual tongue, Kannada — ordered the cook to make him tea. The *feringhi* (foreigner, a derogatory term), he said, would be speaking with the *barra sahib*. I fielded a sickly-sweet smile at Raju. His dark eyes flashed in furious recognition of my understanding. (His tone had been enough.) Suban and I walked through the camp towards the river. He slipped me a sly grin — a vote of thanks for his boss's discomfiture. I grinned back and added a wink for good measure.

Below us, beyond an expanse of sand dotted with low-lying, riverain scrub, lay the great pool, its surface now lifeless and sullen in the fading light. I had spent many happy days here the year before, camped precariously beneath a single tree at the water's edge. I had had to forgo the luxury of the present campsite in the forest behind, owing to its indefensible nature. Large herds of elephant were then rampaging the area and with our modest bandobast — Anita and I plus occasional visits from the guards — we just could not afford to take the risk of opting for the shady sanctuary offered by the trees during the day, only to see it become a besieged and shadow-haunted fortress by night.

This evening, on the beach we had once camped and burned fires at either end to deter invading elephants, a solitary figure sat on a low, wood-and-canvas folding

*Sundar shows the tackle that has landed several 100lb-plus mahseer from the Kaveri, South India*

stool. It was Mr Van Ingen. He was bait-fishing. Beside him, crouched on his hunkers in characteristically Indian fashion, was a fifth member of his staff. He looked up as we appeared at the gap in the forest edge, turned to his employer and muttered something. Committed now, I stepped forward and led the way down.

'Good evening, Mr Boote,' the great man said with a brief smile, looking up from his rod.

'Good evening, sir,' I replied, 'I'm very pleased to meet you.' I lapsed immediately into awkward silence. I could only gaze in wonder at the ancient greenheart rod and great Silex reel.

'I hear you have been having some success,' he said to me. 'An eighty-pounder last week I believe? Well done!' I proffered an embarassed smile by way of admission. 'You must forgive me for not replying to your letter last year,' he continued, 'I was out of station when it arrived and, on returning home, I learned that you had left Mysore and were already here on the river. I read your magazine articles. I was most interested to learn that there are still good mahseer in the northern rivers. I understood the situation there to be very poor.'

'It is, sir. There are mahseer in the Beas and still some big fish in the Ganges — only by virtue of the river's size — but for how much longer, no one can tell. I fear that this stretch is the only one remaining in India where mahseer enjoy any degree of protection ...' I smiled awkwardly, 'but then you know a lot more about these things than I do!' I smiled again, idiotically, then babbled on. 'I don't know of any

other fishing left here in the South — I heard a report of fish above ...'

He gave the reel a turn or two to tighten a bow in his line. I looked at him as he did so. 'A slim, alert man in his seventies,' I noted in my journal that evening, 'with the active, far-seeing eyes common to all great fishermen.' When he turned back towards me I knew he had made a decision. He dismissed the man with the water canteen who crouched at his elbow and invited me to move closer. The servant and Suban retired along the beach and began to talk in the manner, I suppose, that servants once did in Britain earlier this century. Suban, no servant, was telling Van Ingen's man about my forty-eight-pounder — in response, it seemed, to the other man's doubts about the young foreigner's abilities as a fisherman. And, judging from Suban's gestures, he was not sparing anything from his account of the recent battle nor stinting in his praise for me either. For the next thirty minutes, with this chorus of claim and counter-claim as background accompaniment, J. de Wet Van Ingen and I sat and talked. I am certain he was aware of what was going on a few yards away across the sand and that he found it rather amusing.

I did not wish to conduct an interview. I had no desire to learn just exactly what happened on the day he caught the 120-pound record, thirty-five years before. I had stared at its photograph often enough and knew intimately the fish's dimensions from references in old Bombay Natural History Society Journals. Besides, I was certain that Mr Van Ingen would be tired of telling screaming-reel fishing stories by now. Instead, we talked of rivers.

He told me of the little Kabini that lay fifty miles to the south-west of his home in Mysore. Back in the 1870s, G.P. Sanderson had said of it, 'The river for monsters, and lots of them, is the Cubbany.' The gentleman now sitting beside me had undoubtedly proved this to be the case. The Kabini was a small river, slower flowing than the Kaveri, and one that ran through heavy jungle. Teak and bamboo abounded; elephant and *gaur*, the wild ox, were numerous. Tiger were also present in good numbers. Much of the area along its banks was preserved by the Wadeyar Maharajas as a shooting preserve. The many trophies taken from the forests by their guests helped to keep the Van Ingen family in business. (The Maharaja's guests included in their number some illustrious personages. I later saw a photograph on a wall of the old royal hunting lodge beside the Kabini at Karapura, captioned: 'The Russian grand-dukes at breakfast in the forest, 1881.') In response to my question about the Kabini now, he replied with a terse 'All gone.' A dam had been built and the valley flooded in the 1970s. The mahseer were still present but virtually uncatchable in the lake due to great stands of uncut timber rising from the the bottom right up to the surface: a graveyard for tackle. I sensed also his feelings about lake fishing for mahseer: like me, he did not much relish fishing for this grand lady of the rapids in still waters. I sought hope for the fish in the upper river above the dam impoundment. He told me that the otherwise delightful local Kuraba tribal people had taken them all. Darkness had now fallen. A satellite arced across the sky. We sat in silence and watched the river.

It was he who broke the silence.

'These Cauvery fish are fighters, you know. Like the old Bhavani fish....' He caught my look of interest. 'The Bhavani was a lovely jungle river in its upper and middle reaches. Fast flowing, with mahseer of all sizes. Interesting fishing. Gone now, I am afraid. But there are still some portmanteaux in the Cauvery. There are big fish here.' He gestured at the pool with the old rod. 'I fought one for over four hours on my last visit. My men fed me my dinner as I played it. It broke away at well past ten o'clock.' He smiled ruefully, then quickly continued. 'But Joubert and I suspect the very biggest may be at the head of KRS — the dam at Krishnarajasagar — where the river enters. Sometimes, heavy fish can be seen rolling there. Not a good fishing ground, unfortunately. Far too many people.' He paused for a few seconds. 'And I also understand those visitors took a good fish at Sivasamudram the other year. You might not waste your time trying there. There is some fine water, though you may find poachers a problem. Good spinning water.'

The following spring I took his advice and travelled to Sivasamudram. Over the course of three days and two nights, I explored the gorge that lay below Ganganachukki, one of the twin chutes of the great Cauvery Falls. The river was as wild as the country through which it ran. A succession of roily pools, linked by violent rapids, roared through a riverscape dotted with house-sized granite boulders. Fine water, as Mr Van Ingen had said.

My companion on this expedition was Sundar Raj, who is (and I unashamedly repeat myself here) one of the best fishermen I have known. A Sivasamudram man himself, he had taken several one-hundred-pound mahseer from the river in recent years with only a five-foot bamboo cane for a rod and a lathe-turned wooden bobbin as a reel. Sundar used the 'rod' merely as an aid to casting and bait presentation (running deadbait, fig and crab being his specialities) and, on hooking a fish, he at once threw the stick into the river. The fish was then played off the line running directly across the palms of his hands. Sometimes a scrap of cloth was worn to avoid the inevitable and terrible wounds. Sometimes it was not. In this fashion he landed a mahseer of one hundred and forty pounds. The fish took him one and a quarter miles downstream during the course of a one-and-three-quarter-hour-long fight. He swam after it for most of the way. Whenever I hear myself complaining about what a hard time a fish has given me, I have only to think of Sundar before again seeing things in their true perspective.

As we toiled our way through that wild country, all about us there was evidence of uncontrolled fishing activity. Nets and nightlines were not a problem: to us, the mahseer or the river — they had been used here since time immemorial. It was the dynamite. The fish were being bombed, incessantly. Even the fish-hungry net- and line-fishermen detested the practice, for the few remaining mahseer were now so wary they would feed only at night, and then in such wild water that a line (if it could be set) would be smashed the instant the baited hook was taken. Aware that

we were observing the final scenes of a tragedy, we returned to Sivasamudram village, exhausted and depressed. I felt then that the remnants of India's once great bounty of fish and wildlife were doomed. Even if something were done tomorrow, it could only temporarily halt the destruction. Ultimately, population pressure would destroy the parks and reserves. I felt sick and angry and just plain sad: for the greed and short-sightedness of man and for the fate of this lovely planet. And beside outrage, I felt somehow violated myself. If I had slipped off one of the narrow ledges, high above the river in the gorge that afternoon, I would not much have cared.

The next evening, I stood beside a set of enormous sluice-gates that had been cast in a Kilmarnock foundry at the turn of the century. We were here to fish the power channel, a swift-flowing canal drawn off the Kaveri at a weir several hundred yards upriver. The spot was known locally as The Headworks. Artificial, man-made and not a pretty place by any means, it was the only bit of water for miles around (by virtue of its importance to the hydroelectric station) that was not being bombed to hell. At ten-thirty, in the velvet darkness of an Indian night, it possessed a weird, mysterious beauty. With little conviction, we began to fish.

Sundar, convinced that the situation was hopeless, soon wound up his line. I should too, he told me, for the fish here accepted only natural baits — never artificial lures. I was inclined to agree with him and was just considering a nightcap back at the bungalow, when something took my plug. Thirty-five minutes later, in the presence of Sundar, his friends, and a bemused Headworks nightwatchman, I landed a mahseer of exactly sixty pounds. I was ecstatic. Although I had taken a baker's dozen that were heavier, this fish meant more to me than any of them. Not only was a lure-caught mahseer of sixty pounds from the Kaveri a fish of a lifetime (by virtue of the method of capture — the big fish seldom take lures), it was more than this — much more. Here was living proof of triumph against adversity, of success against all odds. Besieged and beleaguered since a fingerling, this mahseer had run the gauntlet of lines, nets, traps and bombs for nearly a quarter of a century to attain its great size. Truly, a miracle lay on the bank before us.

With great care I carried her far upstream from the booming water by the half-open sluices and returned her to the river. I sat in the darkness then, alone, almost in tears, thinking of the lovely Kaveri and her great fish. At length, my thoughts returned to that evening spent with Mr Van Ingen beneath a jet-and-crystal sky. I was back there, sitting cross-legged on the sand at the feet of the master, listening to him speak and understanding him now. The very fact that he was still there, fishing with pleasure and enthusiasm, gave me hope for all our uncertain tomorrows.

**Chapter Eight**

# A Season in the South

Jeremy Wade

> The thrill of a big mahseer, hooked in heavy water, hurling himself down the rapid with express speed to the tune of a fast emptying reel, has an electric joy apart from any other sport. There is nothing quite like it; and once experienced it is imprinted for ever on the tablets of memory.
>
> A. St J. MacDonald, *Circumventing the Mahseer* (1948)

The midday sun is vertically above, but after two months in India I feign indifference. Fifty yards above the rapid I kick off my plastic flip-flops and carefully pick my way into the water. The river is shallow and calm at first, but within a few yards it is swirling noisily around my knees. A few more steps and I am at the edge of the main flow: go any further and the slightest slip would see me unceremoniously up-ended. After pausing to adjust my footing on the stony riverbed, I press the spool-release on the big multiplier, flex my much punished rod, and send a long cast diagonally upstream to my left. The heavily weighted deadbait hits the water like a mini depth-bomb and then, as the powerful current washes it downstream, sinks slowly out of sight.

The line brushes the top of a rock, protruding like a black iceberg-tip. Behind the rock is a long, turbulent eddy. Checking the line, I swing the bait in here and feel a muffled bump as the lead hits bottom. There is a series of knocks as it trundles along for several yards before coming to rest, lightly caught in some crevice a fathom down, right at the extreme tail of the eddy. Perfect.

With the rod-point held high, to minimize the chance of line drag dislodging the tackle, I wait: left hand round the grip above the reel, rod butt wedged firmly into my right groin, and my sticking-plastered right thumb resting on the tightly screwed spool. I have a momentary flashback: a fish stripping all the skin from the front and both sides of this thumb in the frenzied few seconds of its uncontrollable first run. I blot it from my mind.

If the fish are moving, something will happen very soon.

I also know something else. The chances of hooking a small fish here are negligible. Now that the bait is in position, my anticipation is contaminated by dread. Another flashback: Paul telling me about the time he nearly drowned in these very rapids, in an unequal contest against the river and a fish. A voice inside my head

tries to penetrate my concentration. I silence it. But it becomes the mental equivalent of a contorted face behind glass. I know what it's saying.

*Get the bait out of there!*

But something has found it. The rod rattles in my hands, vibrating my whole body. As the residual tremors die away, all my muscles involuntarily tighten. (*Pull now! While it's not in its mouth!*) Momentarily I can't breathe, as my dry mouth makes a protracted, futile attempt to swallow. Then I feel the judder of the second, and probably last, exploratory knock.

The next time the sag in the line draws taut, it does so with an authoritative finality. The sturdy fibreglass tube in my hands becomes a divining rod, bending to point at the unseen creature. Fighting the reflex to strike at once, I wait the crucial extra second until I feel the pull on my shoulders — and then, for better or worse, sweep the rod upwards as hard as I can.

The response is immediate. The rod is slammed down into an agonizing curve as I fight to arm-wrestle it back up. I mash my thumb into the whirring spool, but the pitch of its screech only increases. In a last bid to hold the fish from where the white water breaks, I increase the pressure as much as the tackle will bear. White gobs of molten adhesive from the sticking-plaster on my thumb are running up the line and plastering the rod-rings. The fish does not yield. Nor does the tackle. What gives, finally, is the grip of my bare feet on the slimy underwater boulders — I start to lose my balance and stumble forward through the water.

*'Loose, LOOSE!'* yells Bola as the fish hits the white water and starts to run down the rapid, the line heading for a large jagged rock. Frantically I slacken off the clutch to avoid the inevitable break — even my thick 42lb leader would otherwise slice clean through. I feel it whip along a serrated edge but there is no break. The drilling of the ratchet approaches the pain threshold — then abruptly stops.

There is just the sound of the water. The line is dead.

Before I know it, Bola is battling diagonally across the current to where the line enters the water behind another rock. Taking hold of the line, he frees it from an unseen snag and follows it to yet another rock near the far bank. Clambering onto its wave-splashed top, he holds the line aloft; but there is no movement. We both wait, motionless, fearing the worst. Suddenly he drops his arms and the line to the rod snaps tight. The fish is still on, heading towards the pool below, followed by Bola in the river and me blundering wet-footed along the large bankside boulders.

When all three of us have descended to the foot of the rapid, I take up position downstream of the fish and wind down. The immovable weight at first feels lifeless. But intermittent tremors tell me that I am, unbelievably, in direct contact. It is staying deep in the race at the entrance to the pool, head down, harnessing the weight of the current with its broad back and shovel-sized pectorals.

Several minutes pass, during which it remains almost motionless. Then, unable to contain for any longer its anger at the unseen force that's trying to pull it off balance, it surges downstream for a rock island the size of a sunken truck — its sculpted

convexities and concavities intersecting at razor-sharp edges. *'Tight! Tight!'* Bola warns. But I don't know what state the line is in after its journey down the rapids, so the pressure I apply is anxiously adjusted in second-by-second response to the jagging pull. By yielding slightly to the sudden shocks that threaten to snap the line, I keep the strain as near constant as possible. With profound relief I hear the ticking of the ratchet slow down and stop.

After a tense pause, I start to gain the initiative; a few yards are won. There's a savage kick on the short line as the fish once again drills across the current. Again the tackle holds it. The fish makes another lunge, but this time is stopped well away from danger. For the first time in the fight I feel it coming off the bottom.

Now I see it for the first time: a long, indistinct flicker of gold, edged with red. Ethereal and without substance or weight, it continually fragments and re-forms, like an underwater flame. It is still, even at this stage, a precarious creature of the imagination. But as I work it nearer, the image comes slowly into focus: fins, scales, the startled eye. It's nearly over.

The final moments happen in slow motion. Half an hour after it was hooked, the great fish rolls over in the rocky shallows and Bola slips a restraining hand securely inside the gill cover. I notice that the last twenty yards of line are comprehensively shredded. It was a close thing.

Hoisted in the big gunny sack a few minutes later, the fish pulls the scales down to fifty-eight pounds. Nearly all of that is muscle. Its length, to the fork of the tail, is just one inch short of four feet; its midriff is thicker than mine.

Back at camp in the evening we have a double celebration. Not only was today's fish the first (apart from a baby caught on ragi) that we have caught since slogging eight miles upstream to the new campsite five days ago; today is also my thirtieth birthday — a fact I had temporarily forgotten. Above the high silhouette of the hill across the pool, Halley's Comet, which in Britain had been indistinguishable from its backdrop of stars, is like a distant searchlight. With the vision of the massive golden fish still swimming through my rum-sodden brain I am tearfully overwhelmed to be in such a place at such a time.

But just before midnight, as I am sinking into sleep, a blinding pain in my upper right arm catapults me to my feet. A torchlight search reveals a scorpion, timely reminder that every coin has two sides.

* * *

During the three and a half months that I spent attempting to fish the Kaveri, neither river nor fish let me have an easy time of it for long. Scarcely had I arrived when, despite bone-dry weather, the river started to rise alarmingly. It seemed to be coming up in pulses, so fast that waves lapped the beach beside the camp. It rose over six feet in a morning. All manner of creepy-crawlies ran from their holes under

the stones into the fast-disappearing campsite. The Karnataka state government had opened the taps at KRS dam, part of a water-for-something-else deal with Tamil Nadu. Suban and Bola advised me to go back to Bangalore: fishing would be wiped out for a week.

The fish, too, were behaving in a perverse manner. Paul has described how a traditional and normally successful way of catching mahseer is to entice them out of their fast-water haunts into the quieter pools by feeding with ragi. But in 1986 on the Kaveri they weren't having any of it. Only a handful of fish were caught from the pools. And these, almost without exception, were very small: two to four pounds. Biggest by far went just over nineteen. In one perfect-looking pool I never even had a touch.

One possible conclusion was that I wasn't feeding on the required grand scale. If this was the case, two things ruled against the obvious remedy. For a start, my budget wasn't up to it. More to the point, this is not my preferred method of fishing. It seems too far removed from what catching fish is about, and I suspect the local fishermen regard the practice as an aberration. (If they could afford endless fifty-kilo sacks of milled ragi, they would eat that, not throw it in the river — and give up the slog of fishing to live.) But forsaking the pools meant venturing into what is, by any normal standards, some very silly water.

The first stretch that beckoned was a long, narrow, sheer-sided channel where the water from a large pool is funnelled, squeezed and accelerated towards double peril. To the left a sheer, smoking waterfall; straight ahead a bubbling maelstrom, its surface tilting inexorably towards what could be the edge of the world.

The place took some getting used to. The combination of twenty-foot depth and sheer force of current meant that in most places it was impossible to get a bait to hold bottom. It would just get slammed into the side before it had had a chance to sink even a few feet. Piling on the lead had little effect; and paying out line merely delayed the inevitable, as well as increasing the risk of snagging. A moving bait? Fine, if you don't mind the cast being fished through in ten seconds flat. More to the point, the mahseer (with one notable exception very early on) weren't interested. Some exercising of the grey matter was called for.

A closer look at the water revealed subtle features in what had, at first sight, appeared to be a uniformly chaotic flow. Most noticeable were wedge-shaped areas of turbulence, distinct from the shifting, random boils of the main flow, that were created by the occasional slight protrusions from the solid rock walls. Here were obvious lairs for fish — out of the main current, where food would tend to settle — that were also fishable.

What's more, there was often a choice of approach: either a longish cast from a strategic point upstream, or — much more interesting — sneaking to within a few yards and simply lowering the bait into the depths. Finding the bottom with either approach was no problem. And by varying rod position and line length, particularly when fishing short-range, the bait could be made to search quite a large area.

The first fish to be encountered in these spots, however, were not the hoped-for mahseer but Carnatic carp and grey, croaking catfish, both averaging between one and two pounds. Not entirely unwelcome at first, these at least gave the chance to vary an otherwise repetitive, vegetarian diet. (Food, more than anything else, always becomes an obsession when there's not much of it about.)

But persistence paid off. Occasionally there would be a take that was immediately distinct from the usual jerky snatches. The bow of line would lift and fall back, without my necessarily feeling anything; then, anything between a few seconds and a half-hour later, it would lift again and the rod-tip would bend: mahseer! — fourteen pounds, sixteen pounds, a number around ten.

But too many times the smaller species would whittle the ragi to nothing before the mahseer moved in. A prolonged period of quiet invariably meant the bait had gone. I responded by switching to baits that had been individually hard-boiled and cooled to give them tough, rubbery skins. Cricket ball size was not too big. A businesslike 5/0 hook was nicked into the skin or attached by a very short hair of light line. The continuous, futile pecks of smaller fish (transmitted along even seventy yards of line to the tip of my left index finger) were now reassurance: proof that, even after an hour or two, the hook was still baited.

Small-scale feeding of loose ragi balls was done as a confidence-builder, both as a prelude to fishing and during the session. Some days, to save time, I combined prebaiting with the walk to answer the call of nature. One daybreak, while engaged in the latter, my head poking out above a rock, I was surprised to meet the eyes of a lone figure walking the overgrown nowhere-to-nowhere path beside the river. We exchanged greetings; in India such a situation is really no big deal. A few minutes later, however, when I had just finished lobbing two dozen perfectly formed cannonballs into the river, I turned to see the same man, on his unexpected return from wherever he had been, staring at me open-mouthed. Never before nor since, not even during my days as a semi-competent teacher of O-level chemistry, have I seen such an expression of appalled incomprehension and bafflement.

In addition to the marginal eddies, I also found a way of fishing a large area in the centre of the channel, where nuisance species seemed less abundant. That I was able to hold a bait here, in spite of the heavy current, was again down to the fact that the channel's topography — and hence its flow — is not completely uniform. The combination of a slight kink in its course and a large underwater obstruction just downstream meant that, by positioning myself on one particular bankside hump and holding the rod high, I could work a bait over a central area of turbulence the size of two tennis courts. This proved very successful. Even though I often had to wait three or four hours for a take, the fish were significantly bigger. In three consecutive morning sessions I hooked fish of 31, 40, 43, 45 and 47 pounds.

Trying to stop such fish in such water is like being mugged. To stand a realistic chance you need a rod that can comfortably dangle a four-pound weight, fitted with a multiplier whose gears and clutch resemble those of an intercontinental juggernaut.

Line should be in the order of 40–45lb breaking-strain.

Such tackle, by normal freshwater standards, is nothing short of murderous. Unnecessarily so? Consider the following. If you take my standard heavy-water outfit (as described above), attach the line to a well-rooted tree, jam your thumb against the reel and bend for all you're worth, you will see that the line, running along the top of the rod between carefully spaced rings, is in no place touching the rod. This is as it should be. Now grit your teeth harder and pull until your eyes are about to pop out and the rod seems on the point of exploding. The line now will just start to brush the fibreglass along the rod's top third; but it is still well clear at the thicker, lower end. There is a good half-inch between the line and the end of the textured plastic grip above the reel. Now look closer at that grip. *It is scored with deep line burns.* There are also marks further up the rod where running line has melted varnish.

Contemplating these painful imprints particularly while fishing, say, the tail-end of the channel (or even, on a few lunatic occasions, the devil's jacuzzi below), I have often been tempted to wind in and go elsewhere. But this is where the fish are. The mind searches for other possibilities. What about the school of thought that proposes letting the fish run under moderate pressure, in the hope that sheer distance will tire it out, after which it can be landed in more user-friendly water? It doesn't work here. There is no quiet water below: it just gets worse. Instead of struggling to stop the fish changing out of second, you end up with it going full-throttle in top, faster than you can follow, with a momentum that doesn't bear thinking about. So there's no choice. Anything less than barbaric tackle — and attitude — puts far too much reliance on luck.

But brute force alone is not enough. If you lock the reel so it can't give line, there will always be a weak link and the fish will always find it. Where crane-and-hawser tackle is being used, the weak link is likely to be the angler. I was once jerked off-balance by a channel fish — this with the reel giving line — and was only saved by Suban grabbing the waistband of my shorts in mid-dive. That fish, an absolute maniac, went only twenty-two pounds. And I heard of an experienced local fisherman on another stretch, a man accustomed to bouncing down rapids tethered to large fish by a ninety-pound handline, who was forced to let go to avoid being drowned. It sounds paradoxical, but brute force must be applied with finesse.

What this boils down to is letting the fish have line at just below its breaking point. The large, star-shaped drag-nut is tightened until a strong tug will just cause the clutch to slip. But this mechanical device alone can't give the fine control you require. Fine control comes from the thumb. In the cataclysmic first few moments, pressure must be modulated split second by split second, with action following stimulus almost at the speed of a reflex. But, unlike a reflex, the basic reaction is continuously modified by feedback and open to override, consciously controlled in the light of what you see, feel and hear.

Thus, when you're not actually experiencing the mahseer's violence, you find

yourself mentally rehearsing, again and again, your likely response to it, in the light of the prevailing circumstances. How strong is the water? Are the boulders smooth or sharp? What concealed snags are there that you know about? How did any previous fish from here behave? Then, always, you consider the following. If you can't stop the fish, can you follow it? Along the bank, in the coracle, or in the water? To jump in some water would be madness. Some is borderline: you don't know until you've tried it. If you happen to be negatively buoyant, you remember that the normal, feet-forward procedure for descending a rapid is near-impossible with one hand out of the water, trying to maintain a direct line from rod-tip to fish. Impacts are taken, if possible and if their perpetrators are visible, with the free hand; but more likely by elbows and knees, and sometimes by the whole body. In this way, then, in a state of mental self-torture, you wait.

The line straightens and the rod starts to bend. If the battle is to be lost, nine times out of ten it will be in the next few seconds. You push your thumb hard against the spool, lean forward to give a little line and ... *PULL!*

Through the red mist that descends and partially clears, you are aware of rod and body being wrenched in response. Thumb pressure is momentarily released the instant before the line breaks (to allow the spool to overcome its inertia and start spinning) then immediately reapplied hard. A flood of visual, proprioceptive and auditory information — bend of rod, tension in arms and back, pitch of ratchet — is sucked in, processed, acted upon and spewed out. Within a few seconds, if you have reacted correctly, you are aware of the ratchet's noise decreasing; then it stops. You are left with a dead weight that is trying to disconnect all the tendons, sockets and ligaments of your arms. But the worst is over, probably. Apart from the vein-popping exertion required, you're almost back in the realms of normal angling theory and practice.

The point where line meets water is moving almost imperceptibly across the current. Slowly the angle between rod butt and line goes from obtuse to acute, and you wind down a turn or two. In this way you cajole the fish inch by inch back upstream. Aching arms and back tempt you to clamber along the bank to reduce the amount of line you have to regain; but Suban, who knows these fish very well, advises against it. That white water below is a point of no return: you must not do anything that would give the fish even the slightest breathing space. If ever there were a place to follow to the letter H.S. Thomas's advice of *unremitting* pressure, this is it. So you swallow your groans and keep the pressure on. In this way, most of the channel fish are beaten inside twenty unspectacular but gruelling minutes.

But there are situations, I have to admit, when even the tackle and tactics described are inadequate. Sometimes this most powerful of all freshwater fish just will not be stopped.

One thing I have noticed when fishing particularly torrential, sharp-rocked rapids is that, in such water, mahseer very often don't venture out at speed into the current

— even though they surely know their way around. Perhaps they are afraid of injury when they are not fully in control of their balance. Or maybe it's over-confidence. Perhaps large fish don't feel they need the help of the current in defeating the unseen irritant (indeed, a fish that sets off across or into the current is invariably a big one). Whatever the reason, this occasional reluctance to take full advantage of the current can give a modicum of comfort when fishing water that looks particularly daunting. But this is by no means an inviolable rule.

Casting a large ragi ball one day into a newly prospected, very promising-looking spot — a bubbling cauldron of a hole fed by multiple inlets, funnelling into a single, very fast outlet — I had an almost immediate take that wrenched the rod-tip to within inches of the water. As I hung on like grim death the fish went hell-for-leather for the outlet — *and just kept going*. The multiplier clutch was screwed very tight, which was fine for the water close to me, but as soon as the fish hit the fast water, the rod was nearly ripped from my hands. The problem was compounded by the fact that, with the spool rapidly emptying and its speed of rotation consequently getting faster, the resistance to the fish was actually increasing — potential disaster. With the rod bucking in my hands as the overheated clutch alternately locked and slipped I fumbled to undo the drag. Just in time I avoided the break. And then the fish stopped — right at the lip of a monstrous chute. But my relief was short-lived. The line fell slack. The fish had gone.

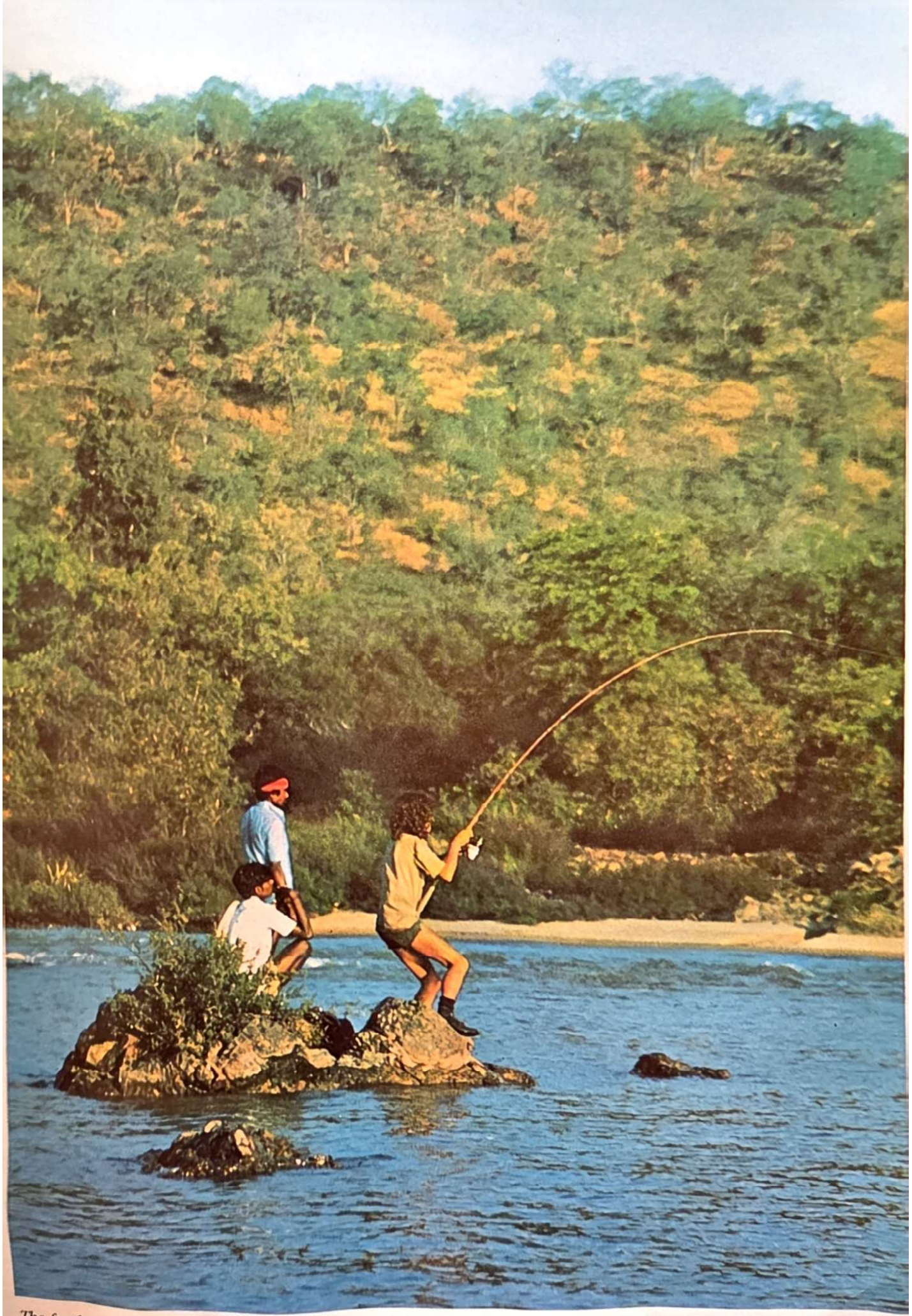
'*Oh!* How many kay-gee mahseer!' cried Bola, clutching his head with both hands. I couldn't speak. That peculiar subspecies of grief known only to anglers had entered my soul and switched out all the lights. Something rare had been briefly touched, then lost irretrievably. On inspecting the end of the line we found it to have been sliced clean through.

I came to, feeling physically sick. I tried to occupy my mind by addressing the conundrum. At first there appeared to be no solution. Even against maximum resistance, a big mahseer was going to take a lot of line in this place; but there were razor-sharp rocks down there, and a long, taut line was almost certain to be cut. The only possible answer lay in trickery. The next time a fish couldn't be stopped in the first few yards, I would quickly slacken off *completely* and hope that, feeling an end to the resistance, it would halt of its own accord. We would then paddle down in the coracle (taking care not to transmit any shocks down the line), take up position on the nearest rock, and resume proceedings in the danger area on more equal terms: with a shorter line from a high vantage point.

Bola heard me out but looked worried. We carried on fishing. The rest of the session was fairly straightforward: a fourteen-pounder practically yanked from the water on the strike and a twenty-one pounder landed without my even standing up — confirmation, if I needed it, that I had lost a monster.

Over the next few days I had a couple of fish around the twenty-pound mark that gave no real trouble.

Then, four days later, I hooked another demon. Bola looked on in disbelief as I



*The fateful magazine cover shot (see Chapter 2). Two pools and one rapid were to be cleared before this 48-pounder came*
ashore. In

*Huge goonch (up to possibly 200lb) shoal in 'No Fishing' water just feet from a sunbathing mugger (left) and two gharial*

*When this 80lb Kaveri mahseer completely emptied the reel on its first run (230 yards of 25lb-test), Paul had to jump in after it. 45 minutes later its 4ft 11¾in length is cradled by Bola, Suban and Raju*

completely unwound the drag-nut and attempted to contemplate the evaporation of the line with detached nonchalance. Never had a spool spun at such an impossible rate (though I have seen it since). After some of the longest moments in history, its rotation slowed — then stopped. Suddenly both acting very clumsily, we practically fell into the coracle and floated down towards the top of the big rapid, gently winding in the limp line. Once on a strategic rock I steadied my knocking knees, tightened up the clutch and wound down.

The fish's response to this second surprise was not (mercifully) to disappear down the rapid, but to hug the bottom of the deep 'pot' at its head. Slowly I gained line, an inch or two at a time. When we finally got it in, we could hardly believe our eyes: just seventeen pounds. One of those rare little 'uns that takes off like a monster. It really is true what the old-timers said: that on its first run a ten-pound mahseer can pull like a fish ten times its size. But I still felt in my bones that the one I had lost had been huge.

The next fish I hooked, the next day, was stopped just before the outlet, just as I was about to call for the coracle. Sixteen pounds.

But there was something different about the next one, hooked the following afternoon. The first part of our by now well-rehearsed plan was accomplished without a hitch; but standing on a small rock near the head of the rapid, with the line going vertically down into the water, I could not get whatever it was to budge. There was just an absolutely dead weight.

'Rock?' I looked at Bola.

'Fish.'

And indeed, after a long interval, ever so slowly, the length of line between rod-tip and water was seen to increase. I was able to wind down a fraction of a turn. Fifteen minutes later a very exhausted mahseer rolled over on the surface: a beautiful, barrel-shaped fish of exactly fifty pounds.

* * *

As befits members of an embattled species, all the Kaveri mahseer I caught were returned alive. But, at the same time, some of their brethren were being cut off in their prime by some very unnatural natural causes. One evening we were returning upriver in the coracle (I had been joined by a friend, David Lott, for a couple of weeks) when Bola spotted something through the murk. As we cut across the river, we could see it was a dead fish: a mahseer of about forty pounds, resting against a boulder. Judging by its fresh appearance, it hadn't been dead long; perhaps it had been killed by dynamite upstream, but the bombers had failed to retrieve it. Bola part-lifted it from the water, bending forward to sniff it closely — no, it wasn't fresh enough to give to somebody for a meal. He then turned it over, inspecting it carefully. He didn't seem surprised by what he found. The cause of death, apparently, was a one-inch-diameter hole cleanly drilled into its belly, between

pectoral and pelvic fins. Bola nodded slowly, turned to us and said a single word. *Dumbi.*

David and I looked at each other, then back at Bola, making exaggerated shrugs. Bola frowned, then launched into a complicated mime. He briefly interlocked his two index fingers, giving us each in turn a meaningful look, then pointed at the sky. Then, making a high-pitched buzzing sound and describing very rapid small circles with his forefinger, he swept his arm down to the water. He then became a fish ('Mahseer') engulfing something and swallowing. His finger traced its passage down his throat. Finally, in a fair imitation of John Hurt in the film *Alien*, he mimed something bursting out of his stomach. His eyes bulged and rolled upwards: 'Finish.'

We were aghast, but none the wiser. Back at Galiborai camp, Bola enlisted the support of Suban's uncle, our cook at the time. As Bola gave an intense repeat of his earlier routine, Suban Sahib sat Buddha-like by the fire, waggling his head and buzzing. For something so creepy it was starting to get out of hand. Something came out of the sky, it was very small, it was black. No, it didn't breed inside the fish, it came out unchanged *within about a minute* and flew away. We still had no idea what it was. The language barrier was for once insurmountable. (I had long given up on my unfathomable Kannada and Tamil language manuals: reptilian *Kama Sutras* of snakes swallowing one another's tails.)

The next day, Bola showed us a tree stump pierced by holes similar to the one in the fish. Holmes and Watson were more confused than ever.

At siesta time the day after that, Bola suddenly jumped to his feet and pointed in the air. We couldn't see anything. This business was obviously getting to him. Then we saw a tiny speck high above. Bola made the linked forefingers sign again. Exasperated at our incomprehension he ditched the euphemism and made an unmistakable pelvic movement.... The scales fell from our eyes. It nests in trees. It is usually solitary. When it mates (as now), its nuptial flight ends in exhaustion, the entwined pair falling to the ground — or into the river. If they float past a mahseer and if the mahseer is so inclined, they are swallowed. If they pass the mahseer's throat-teeth uncrushed, they drill their way out. Despite all these ifs, the phenomenon is common enough to cause no surprise to the locals. (The mahseer never learn, apart from those for which it's too late.) To outsiders the dumbi is known as *Xylocopa*, the carpenter bee.

* * *

Most of the time, though, my almost total ignorance of Kannada and Tamil was no real handicap. I came to understand Bola, in the sense of knowing what was going on in his mind, better than I do many highly articulate English-speakers. The key, of course, was our shared interest. The river speaks in no human tongue, but humans can nevertheless learn to decipher its messages; and the language is universal. Many times Bola and I would simultaneously pause on the bank and both look at the same

rock, before turning to each other and nodding. 'There's a fish behind that rock,' I would be thinking, knowing that Bola's thoughts, though given voice in a different tongue, were identical.

Non fish-related subjects were obviously more tricky, but over the many weeks that we spent in each other's company, our common vocabulary of words and gestures steadily increased. Paradoxically, the limited size of this vocabulary often led to highly appropriate observations. Like the time the red-eyed *sadhu* (Hindu priest) appeared beside us on the riverbank at Mosale Halla, then promptly dematerialized before our eyes. We both agreed, amid suppressed sniggers, that his enormous brass chillum, only just visible through the pungent clouds of marijuana smoke that it emitted, was a 'muzzle-loader'.

So I really should have been more careful on the occasions when I muttered to myself.

One occasion when I used to talk a lot to nobody in particular was when I would be visited by a certain black-and-yellow fly, taking a break from its normal pastime of drilling into cattle and elephants.

Typically, one appears on your thigh when you are halfway across the torrent, feet searching for a grip on slimy, shifting, underwater boulders, and your arms full of fragile fishing rods and expensive photographic gear. Transferring the contents of one hand to the opposite armpit, you prepare to swat. Your target hops round to where only the other hand can reach it. After weeks of apoplectic juggling, punctuated by a stinging rain of self-administered blows (not to mention the mental pain of being outwitted by a mere insect), you learn the trick. If you vigorously shake your leg (without falling over), you discover that this somehow immobilizes the creature — perhaps it blurs its vision, or rattles its brain so it can't think — allowing you at last to make delicious contact. But if you now remove your hand to gloat at the remains, a completely intact insect flies away. So what you must do is insert the thumb and forefinger of your other hand (assuming you can balance rods, cameras etc on your head for a few moments) and pincer it to its constituent atoms.

As you can imagine, this learning process is accompanied by occasional exclamations. And reckoning that I wouldn't offend anybody here with some appropriate Anglo-Saxon, I was a bit less inhibited than I normally would have been. This was underestimating Bola's ability to observe and assimilate, as I realized one day when I felt the too-familiar tickle on my leg. Simultaneously Bola's quiet voice behind me warned, 'Careful sir, bastard coming.'

* * *

*'Elephants everywhere!'* shouts the shaky scrawl at the top of my notebook entry for April 19th. After two and a half months with only one distant sighting, suddenly we were surrounded.

It started with an earth-shaking chorus of crashing and bellowing from somewhere

downstream on the opposite bank. (Punctuating the trumpeting of the adults was the occasional, almost comical *Peep! peep! peep!* of a youngster.) Then they crossed to our side. Night was falling. We reviewed our situation. We were not blocking an obvious bankside path or access to the water. The firecrackers (and matches) were to hand. The coracle was sitting ready in the water. But when we came to light the two hurricane lamps that always stood at either end of the campsite, we discovered that one had developed an attack of nerves: it wouldn't keep going unaided for more than two minutes at a time. There was no alternative but to fire up the kerosene-guzzling Petromax, which was normally only used for half an hour at supper time. For good measure we made a fire from some hastily gathered scraps, then performed the nightly ritual of smoothing the sand prior to laying out the bedding. We turned in with a distinct feeling of unease.

*Crack!* We were startled awake just before midnight by the explosive report of a tree being pushed over — a jagged splinter of sound that pierced us with chilling immediacy through the empty night air. Then silence so absolute that it was not an absence but a presence. The very earth held its breath.

Eyeballs stripped to their fullest extent, we stared in the direction of the epicentre: the fringe of the valley's wooded slope, a flat, scrub- and boulder-littered hundred yards away. All we saw was the enigmatic wall of blackness where our fragile bubble of light ended. Ears felt for the merest tremble of the air, for some sign that the battalion had passed us by. There was not even a twig snap. A slow, uneventful hour passed. Insistent sleep refilled eyes and heads with liquid lead.

Some time later we were woken again. Almost an exact rerun of before. The hands of my watch mocked: not yet three. Still plenty of night to go.

But the rest of the night was undisturbed. We awoke for the last time at six, the Petromax still blazing, relieved beyond measure to see the dawn.

Shortly afterwards, Siddu, the young lad I had recently taken on to cook and watch camp, came rushing back from his early-morning leg stretch. 'Big danger! Big danger!' he gasped, pointing over his shoulder, up the riverbank. I cautiously followed the direction he had indicated: there were steaming cannonballs of compressed vegetation and clean-edged indentations in the sand at the very next access to the water. Some time between the distant commotions in the night a silent group had come to drink a mere thirty yards from where we had been lying.

Then I saw what Siddu hadn't seen. Slightly further on, one of the grey boulders in the water flicked a tail. I froze, but they had spotted me. Forming a tight phalanx, they emerged onto the bank, crossed the strip of clear ground bordering the river and dissolved into the scrub at the edge of the jungle. Except one. A flick of his ear gave him away, looking out from behind a bankside tree. His dark eye appeared to regard me intently. After standing motionless for two or three minutes, his water-blackened bulk emerged into full view, started to follow the route taken by the others, then stopped. Two curves of gleaming ivory turned like divining rods. He advanced towards me.

Heart racing, I retreated to the boundary of the camp, where I forced myself to stop and turn. Hazarding that his approach was prompted more by short sight than aggression, I faced him squarely, my feet apart and arms held slightly out from my sides: a pose that (I hoped) rendered me easily identifiable, unthreatening and unafraid. The latter was a bluff: I hissed at Siddu to get the *potaki*, the firecrackers.

My short-sight theory appeared to be wrong. The elephant's stride increased purposefully. I recalled that the previous year a juvenile had knocked Joubert Van Ingen to the ground, breaking his ribs. Only the partial shelter of a boulder and the timely appearance of his men had prevented the crushing-by-kneeling follow-up. Suban, too, once escaped by the seat of his pants: he was riding his bicycle through ths scrub when it was snatched from underneath him and thrashed against a tree by a lone bull with a secret grudge....

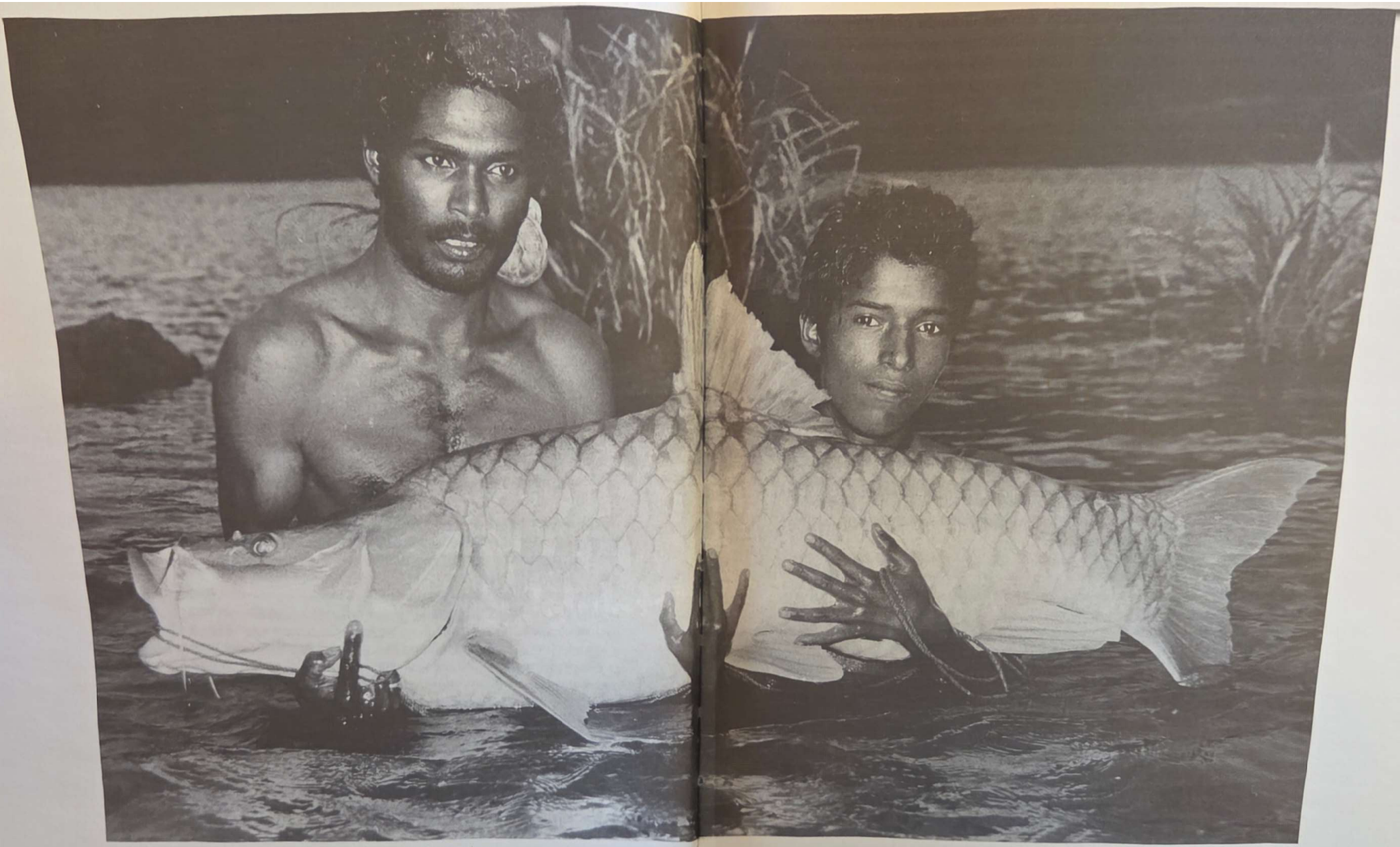
I was on the point of making a break for the coracle, grabbing the most important equipment en route, when, inexplicably, the charge halted. Siddu threw three firecrackers and we both started yelling. '*Yeeeaaarghh!* Go on! Go away!' The monstrous creature did a clumsy pirouette and obligingly trotted off. The sight of his disappearing rear end and little, stringy tail turned our shouts into relieved, nervous giggles — a sharp contrast to the near-dread of only moments before.

But the incident had badly shaken us. Siddu was anxious to move camp. The sight, later in the day, of twenty-two elephants on the opposite bank meant there was little point in that. Having had time to reflect, however, I felt strangely calm and reassured. The episode confirmed my gut feeling that their presence was essentially benign, and that, provided we respected them, they would respect us.

And so it turned out. Many times in the weeks that followed, a group would silently materialize just a stone's throw along the riverbank from where I would be fishing. Something would make me look up and there they would be. I never once saw their approach, across the wide flood-plain between jungle-covered hillside and river.

Sometimes they were plainly unaware, at first, of my presence, raising their trunks to sniff the air when the shifting breeze brought an unfamiliar scent. David tells of the time he saw the elephantine equivalent of a motorway pile-up. A convoy nearly a dozen strong was approaching the river when the leader elevated his trunk periscope-fashion and slammed on the brakes. Elephant number two, head down and looking forward to a drink and a shower, kept going, head-butting the leader in the rump — and so on all down the line. David, who was sitting a hundred yards upriver, swears the leader's hind legs were hoisted six feet off the ground. But then the others caught the scent, hastily disengaged themselves and turned silently back for the jungle. Sitting just twenty-five yards in front of them, I had been oblivious to it all.

Other times, I'm sure, they were fully aware we were there, and just quietly went to drink, and bathe, a little way along the bank. It sounds corny, but I felt we had passed some kind of test and had been accepted into their home.



*Bola and Siddu release a big chiluva-caught mahseer into the pool below its white-water home*

I wish I could say the same about the monkeys. At Onti Goundu pool they would make their way into the top branches of the giant muthhi tree under which we were camped, silently lower themselves down the trunk and, if not spotted, make off with goodies from the food store. It is a matter of some pride that I have never had anything stolen by human thieves while abroad (although I have twice found other people's hands in my pockets), but the Kaveri monkeys are superhuman in this respect. And when supplies are several hot, footslogging miles away, followed by a stifling bus journey and perhaps an overnight stop, even the loss of a half-kilo of tomatoes is no joke. Vigilance has to be constant.

They also have an attitude problem. Once when moving camp, I spotted a pair descending towards the pile of luggage I was guarding. In response to my hoots and waving arms, the male just looked me in the eye and showed his teeth. I registered with horrified fascination some very impressive canines. Baring mine produced no reaction. I buzzed him with the only stone I could find without leaving the gear, but all he did was shuffle a little farther up his branch.

Acting on a hunch, I pointed my camera. This at least got a response: he moved to a slightly higher branch, where, disdainfully looking the other way, he proceeded to pee in my direction. Fortunately he missed by a good few yards, but his expression told me that it had been primarily symbolic. Any attempt to return the compliment, with gravity against me, would have been unconvincing, so we resumed our uneasy stalemate. Both our repertoires were exhausted.

In the end, it was my capacity for boredom that proved superior to his. (I don't like to dwell on the implications of this.) After idly watching me do nothing for several minutes, he decided he had impressed his girlfriend enough. She moved off somewhat furtively, he with a self-assured swagger, his rump a perfect target for the catapult that I vow to bring another time.

Back at Onti Goundu some weeks later, we were shaken out of our siesta by a fearful commotion in the shrubs behind us. Two vultures were having a mid-air fight, during the course of which a little furry ball fell to the ground. I was immensely touched as Bola, with no thought for his own safety, rushed forward and rescued the little creature, a quail. Within about a minute, however, it was minus all its feathers, in pieces, and in the frying pan. But after endless weeks of one vegetable curry after another, I had to agree that it was indeed 'Very good eating.'

* * *

A natural phenomenon on the Kaveri that can cause the angler much frustration is the thick, red water, often with lots of surface rubbish, that starts to appear towards the break of the monsoon. This is the result of rain upstream, even if the local weather is still baking. At first it is intermittent, but all too soon it's almost constant. The fishing goes right off. The normally ubiquitous grey catfish disappear. The small

carp become impossible to catch (though I once watched Bola extract four small slime-suckers from a rock pool in these conditions with his hands). And the mahseer become all but uncatchable. You can go many days without a fish.

I only stuck at it because, fish or no fish, I didn't want to leave.

The reason for the curtailed activity was not hard to fathom. In normal, productive conditions I could easily see the outline of my hands at arms' length, even several feet under water. When the river was coloured I could see nothing. Even with my eyes just half an inch below the surface, there was just a red-tinged darkness. So it must have been for the mahseer, too.

Or is it this clear-cut? Perhaps mahseer see when we can't. Look more closely at the river. Fill a clear bottle with water taken from the main flow and you will notice that the degree of obscurity varies from day to day. This is not obvious at first sight, only after comparing the amounts of sediment that eventually settle. This variation seems to be significant to the mahseer. On days when the river is fully loaded, it is not worth picking up a rod. At fifty per cent there's not much more chance. But below about twenty-five per cent the chances suddenly increase. With this knowledge you can concentrate your efforts on the least unproductive times. And the results can be surprising.

One afternoon in early May, four days after Bola had glumly declared 'Season finish' and nine days after I had last caught a fish, I pendulum-cast a large walnut-flavoured ragi ball seventy yards into the mouth of the channel. The weather had been deteriorating rapidly, with much thunder and lightning the previous night, but there had been no recent rain. As I fished, a strong easterly wind built up. Vultures circled high over the hills on the opposite bank.

Just before six the wind dropped. I was talking with Bola when the rod bent in my hands. I struck, felt the weight of the fish, but there was no answering lunge. Unusual. Whatever it was felt small. As it came in with little resistance we agreed on fifteen to twenty pounds.

But several things were not quite right. It moved in a strange way, the line making weird jerky movements back and forth. Twice there was a sudden *twang!* followed by a curious 'loosening' sensation that momentarily made me think the fish had detached itself. And a small fish would not have normally stayed deep all the way in. I increased the pressure to see what would happen; the rod hooped further but the fish's behaviour remained unchanged.

So when at length the water boiled under the rod-tip, we were both craning to get a good look. But the fish saw us first and didn't like what it saw. In the midst of a plume of spray we caught a split-second glimpse of a long, white shape, as the reel, which I had loosened just in case, emitted a long, drawn-out whine.

Twenty yards away the fish stopped. For several minutes now it chugged powerfully around in front of us, in the 'funnel' area of the channel, as the rod groaned in my hands. It was like being attached to a car that was doing repeated, deliberate three-point turns. Slowly it tired.

The fish that Bola finally cradled was like nothing I had seen before: it was almost completely white, like a ghost. Weighing in at sixty-one pounds, it was the last big mahseer that I caught from the Kaveri.

Summoning this memory six years later, I find it joined by other ghosts: pictures, sounds, echoes of emotions ... They are all, at this remove, somewhat unbelievable. (Most of the evidence has gone: all my slides disappeared in a house move.) Yet, like the line burns on my rod, that I sometimes find myself looking at, and touching, they are scored so deep that they defy disbelief.

The cold-sweat stupefaction. A heavily weighted bait is lowered into a narrow cleft in the earth and falls 160 feet through churning water before it touches bottom — and then I feel the knock of a fish.

The exhilaration. Shooting the rapids in a fully laden coracle, I leave my stomach in my mouth as we swoop past the point of no return.

The madness. With just my head and right arm above the foam, I ricochet off the rocks of Mosale Halla rapid in pursuit of a running fish.

The solitude.

The frustration. I leave all my equipment in a village shed only to find on my return that the caretaker has left for good and changed the lock.

The despair. The lingering feeling of sickness, the vestiges of which I still feel, that followed the loss of the Razor Hole monster.

The tragedy: that Bola, who is one of the most intelligent, capable people I know, is consigned by accident of birth to a life among the poorest of the poor.

The elation. The fish — caught on only 22lb main line from the channel on a moving ragi ball — that Suban couldn't lift from the water. I had to lay the rod down and help him carry it to safety. It weighed ninety-two pounds.

The sadness. I have never been back.

**Chapter Nine**

# Pilgrims

Paul Boote

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun;
and I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth,
at Bethlehem I had my birth.

Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he;
and I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
and I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.

Sydney Carter, 'Lord of the Dance'

The telephone rang and I answered it.

'Paul Boote?'

'Speaking.'

'John Bailey, the angling writer.'

'Hello John. How can I help you?'

'I know some people who want to make a film in India and you are the man who can help them.'

'Yes, perhaps I can. Let's meet and talk.'

A few weeks later I met John at a hotel in Hay-on-Wye. With him were Denis and Linda Mitchell — the film people he had mentioned during his call. Over a partially incinerated Dover sole we discussed fishing in general and Indian mahseer in particular. Denis Mitchell was an eminent film director. His work over the past forty years had made the splendid documentaries we watch on our televisions what they are today. He was the creator — more, the Godfather — of the genre. I did not know this at the time. I merely saw before me an elderly, somewhat irascible man with eyes that fixed you and an inclination to sit for long periods without speaking, observing and listening to what the people around him had to say, and then to ask the most pertinent question, or make a simple statement that put all the previous bluster and circumlocution immediately into perspective. I was at once aware that here was a man who perceived things which most of us miss entirely. An unnerving talent. Linda, his wife, was a producer. She had the difficult and often thankless task of presenting film ideas — projects — to television companies and then calculating and submitting production budgets which would not immediately outrage the

initially interested party. I liked the look of them.

Later that evening — after a return journey through the very worst of Welsh weather to my home in northern Pembrokeshire, and having narrowly missed a sheep which, I maintain to this day, was blown across the road before me a full yard above the rain-lashed surface — I sat down and reflected upon the day's events. I had been made my first (and almost certainly my last) film offer. The Mitchells wished to make a travel documentary which featured two men in search of the Mighty Mahseer. I had to be one of them.

In the autumn of 1980 I had written an article for *Angling* magazine. The piece described the remarkable events that followed a long and memorable summer spent in the Himalaya, fishing for brown trout in Kashmir. At the end of a four-month stay in this lovely region (a story which, sadly, must wait until another time), I travelled to a spot about which I had been told a couple of years before. The stories I had heard — of the locality itself and the fish occasionally to be found there — had made me vow to return to India come what may, find that remote spot and fish it hard. I did get back, of course, and John Bailey in his turn read about the expedition. Years later he showed the story to Denis Mitchell, who at once recognized its potential as a subject for a television documentary. This is how I came to be in bookish Hay-on-Wye one dismal Sunday evening in the autumn of 1988, answering searching questions with tales of a giant fish that swam a mighty river half a world away.

That night I sat up late with a bottle of rum, my old tipple from Indian days. A south-westerly gale blew in from the Irish Sea half a mile away and roared wildly in the chimney above the stove. I began to think of India. I had talked a lot about the country in the six years since I was last there: at slide-shows for angling clubs and associations, for local branches of wildlife trusts, for Women's Institutes, for charity fundraisers — for just about anyone who bothered to pick up a phone and ask me. But during this period I had never really thought about the place. I missed the fishing terribly sometimes, it was true — especially when friends returned with accounts of monsters from the Kaveri — but a lot of the old feelings had gone, replaced with the emotional equivalent of the big, beautiful but bland images projected on a screen at the far end of a hall. Images which were now nearly as alien to me as they were to the people seeing them for the first time. Tonight was different, though. India reached out and touched me and I felt the old electricity crackle in return.

I really wandered down memory lane that wild Welsh night. (I think the almost lethal, eighty-degrees-proof Austrian rum may have had something to do with it.) I rifled through files and found old licences and letters, pulled down a stack of travel and fishing journals from the shelf and generally had a nauseatingly sentimental wallow in a mire of memories. At the end of it, swaying up the stairs to bed, I felt the unsettling presence of the spectre of change at my elbow. It had found me again at last. That evening I realized just how fearful a decade the 1980s had been for me.

During this period, the pressures exerted upon the individual probably increased more than they had done at any time since the onset of the industrial revolution. The brave new world envisaged by a small but influential group of politicians and economists demanded that we all suddenly 'go for it', like 'it' or not. The stark message of this designer decade was: prosper at all costs and let the devil take the hindmost. The result for a while was something approaching mass neurosis, with many being called, few being chosen and most, at the close — be they a success or a failure — wondering what the hell it had all been about. I was no exception.

At the start of the decade Anita and I had bought a house together and settled down. I continued to spend two or three months of the year in India, managing fishing and wildlife tours, and the rest reluctantly commuting to an office in London. At the end of 1982 my days in the travel trade came to an end. It was a great relief, until I faced the tyranny of the new mortgage. I drifted for the next two years, spending a disastrous six months with another travel company, deskbound, writing brochures about places I had never seen nor would ever wish to visit. During my many idle moments at the office and, later, at home, I dallied with long-held dreams of doing something involved with fishing. Since boyhood I had been a fair rodmaker: perhaps I could turn my hand to that, make a small country-living somewhere and still have plenty of time to fish?

In the meantime, fishing became an increasingly necessary anodyne. Whenever the milk and honey of life threatened to turn sour, I would throw a fly rod into our rapidly decaying car and make for the River Kennet at Hungerford, where still a few of the big brown trout, tucked away in the least accessible places, had not begun life in a stewpond with a welter of pellets to see them on their way. Then, after the Mayfly glut of mid-June, another rod or two would join the graphite wand on the back seat and I would fish the morning for trout at Hungerford followed by a late afternoon and evening after barbel a few miles downriver near Newbury. Autumn and winter were fully occupied with sorties after grayling with both the fly and the trotting rod, marathon fly-dressing sessions (I still have heaven knows how many dry flies, nymphs, bugs and shrimps to show for them), and brief, eventful days in the frost-browned watermeadows of lowland streams in search of chub. Occasionally I would cast my eyes longingly back in the direction of West Wales; memories of the sea-bright salmon and *sewin* (sea trout) had not dimmed with time. 'One day,' I said to myself. 'One day ...'

It took the end of Anita's and my relationship early in 1984 to stir me into action. There had been something missing in our life together for some time, something so dreadfully wrong that eventually neither of us could ignore or deny its existence any longer. I blamed myself at first, castigating myself for being an insensitive, selfish rat who thought of nothing else but fishing. This to an extent was true; but today, Anita and I, as old and close friends, both agree that our shared passion had merely run its course. Sad as it was, our parting was just the catalyst I needed. It was time to take stock, stop dreaming, find the nearest grindstone and place my nose firmly against it.

Within three months I had set up in business as a maker and designer of fishing rods — a fashionable small businessman, no less. In this manner, I became a somewhat bemused and often reluctant participant in the strange decade that was the 1980s.

* * *

Of all the rivers I fished in India, the one now destined to become a film location — the mighty Ganges — had meant the most to me. But this had not been always the case. During my initial research back in the 1970s, obvious beauties like the Beas, Ramganga and Kaveri had caught my eye. Their sparkling waters, forested precincts and relatively manageable size had attracted the anglers of the past, won their approval and affection and, as a result, were written of in glowing terms. The few references made to the Ganges spoke of a huge river holding undoubtedly huge mahseer, yet there was something begrudging in their tone. You could not help feeling that these early suitors had been intimidated by the lady: unable to come to terms with her sheer size and power and, perhaps more important, her fickle ways, they had, ever so politely, trashed her reputation. In my ignorance, I was prejudiced too. When I imagined the Ganges, I pictured a vast, filthy, sluggish tide sliding greasily between low-lying, heavily populated banks. I did not care how big the mahseer were, I would not fish such a river. A brief sightseeing visit was in order, certainly, but I would leave it at that. Then, a few weeks before our departure in September 1978, a letter arrived from a retired gentleman living in York.

I never met Ronnie Bobb, the author of that letter. I now very much wish I had, for it was he who enabled much of this book to be written. His name had been given to me by a correspondent in India, who believed that this man might have fished for mahseer at some time in the past. I wrote to him and when I received his reply, full of hand-drawn river maps and fascinating nuggets of mahseer lore, I realized that I had struck gold. Ronnie Bobb's knowledge of north Indian mahseer fishing was encyclopaedic. And as a man who had worked at the very desk at which Rudyard Kipling once sat during his days on *The Pioneer* newspaper, he was able to report basic information in an accurate and interesting manner. This is what he had to say about the Ganges:

> The Ganga (Ganges) used to teem with large mahseer. Take a trip to Dehra Dun (140 miles from Delhi) and contact a friend of mine, Terence T—— at the Doon Guest House in the Rajpur Road. Dehra Dun lies on a vast ridge which separates the Jumna River in the west and the Ganga to the east. From the town you can approach the Ganga (35–40 miles) and there are places to fish from Hardwar (Holy of Holies for Hindus) upstream to Rishikesh and beyond. There are some holy places which are taboo for fishermen, so please make sure you find out where these are. Terry will either give you the latest information regarding other good spots, or put you in touch with others who can ... I used to know a great angler called Col Morris Mehta in Dehra Dun — you may be able to trace him. If you can find Morris, he will be able to tell you of places where you are sure to catch big mahseer.

Later, Ronnie sent me further detailed information and finally, a few days before our departure, letters of introduction to a number of his close friends in India. We had spoken just twice on the telephone and exchanged a mere handful of letters. Here was a brother angler and a gentleman — a rare breed and an example to us all. After all his kindness, I could hardly *not* visit the Ganges.

* * *

Terry, a frail, fastidious, elderly gentleman, appeared on the steps of the Doon Guest House, gave us tea in the drawing room and then took us, as Ronnie had predicted, to people who were currently in the know. They lived just a short drive away on the same side of town. We swung into the grounds of a preparatory school, past the twin stucco gatehouses of what had formerly been a Maharaja's palace, down a concrete drive, to park outside the Principal's residence. Ivan Mann — the nearest thing to Yul Brynner playing the part of an English public school headmaster that I will ever see — came out to greet us. The man bristled with enthusiasm and exuded a slightly stagy, but nevertheless completely genuine charm. I wrote in my journal that night: 'There should be more like him.' Terry told us that Ivan very much had his finger on the pulse of the Ganges fishing and that we could not have arrived at a better time.

'Hi!' said Ivan, 'We're going to hit the Ganges above Hardwar this afternoon. Coming along?'

Just a short while before, Anita and I had staggered off a bus that had travelled for seventeen hours, virtually non-stop, from a town beside the River Beas. I looked at her. She gave me one of her more fathomable looks and I replied, 'We'd love to!'

'We're leaving once the rest of the gang arrive. We get a party together — share the expenses, you know — and have a damn good time! There will be Reggie and Lorna, the two Morrises, Jenny and I — maybe Jimmy too, but I don't know if he's back from Haryana yet.'

We were dragged into the sitting room and immediately plied with tea. In a very short time we were getting on famously with Ivan and his wife, Jenny. Seeing this, Terry made his excuses, wished us all luck, then left. Shortly afterwards the 'gang' began to appear. First came Reggie Greene, a retired Indian Army officer and one of the most likeable people I have met. There was in his boyish cheekiness something reminiscent of a character in a P.G. Wodehouse novel. Lorna, his wife, had the slow-fade looks of a once great beauty. Like him, she too had charm. In fact, all the people we were meeting had charm. It seemed to hang about the place, like something preserved in aspic from colonial days. One of the Morrises appeared: Maurice Lawrence, Lorna's brother. A delightful man in his fifties, he was a perfect example of the bachelor who had never quite managed to find the right girl. Soon we were engaged in a frenzy of fishing- and small-talk. I spoke of the river Beas. Anita was besieged with questions about London and the latest fashions. How we

coped, I shall never know. We were dead on our feet.

A scooter drew up outside. A man appeared at the door a minute later.

'Hel-lo!' exclaimed Ivan, 'Morris! Where have you been? We have two more for the party. Meet Paul and Anita — from London.'

The man at the door fixed me with an assessing yet not unfriendly look, then crushed my hand. He was, of course, Lieutenant-Colonel Morris Mehta.

With as engaging a smile as I could muster, I mumbled something about Ronnie Bobb and coincidences.

'Good fisherman,' he replied. 'Let's talk on the river.'

As we gathered our things together to leave, a taxi drew up and a man in his late sixties got out. He wore a bush shirt, carried a document case and a fishing rod and had about him the air of a slightly forgetful professor. Ivan again made the introduction.

'Paul Boote, meet Colonel John Wakefield.'

Another enthusiastic, almost boyish smile and firm handshake. I did not know it then, but I had met the man with whom I was to work for the next few years and from whom I was to learn so much about India, its ways, its people and its wildlife.

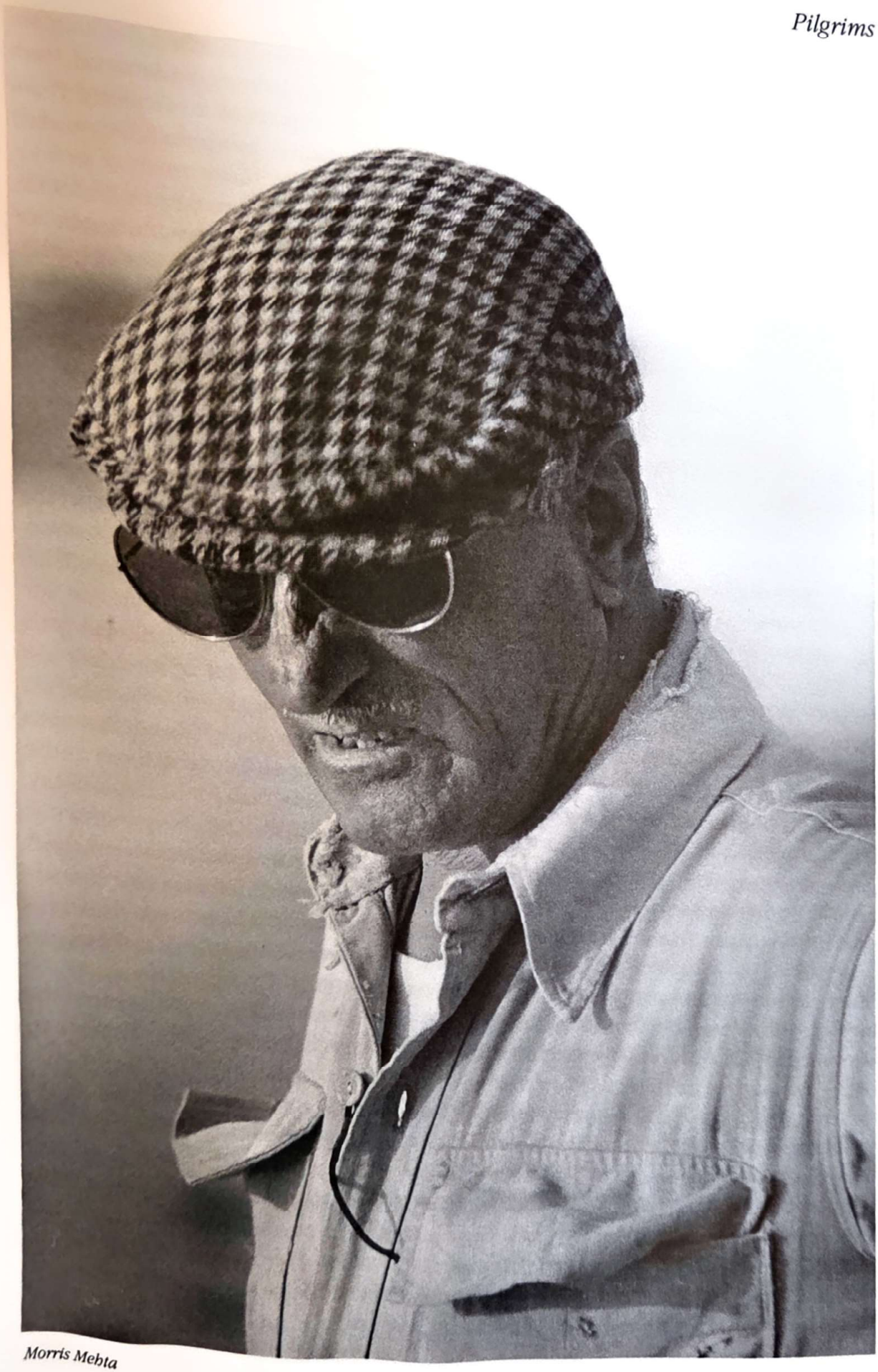
A few minutes later we set off to 'hit' the Ganges. Just where Jimmy had got to, I shall never know.

For a river I had written off as a serious prospect, it did not look at all bad. Two to three hundred yards wide, swift and clear with a gravel-and-boulder bed, this was not the Ganges I had imagined. It was big, certainly, but it was beautiful. Morris Mehta waded waist-deep into its waters and, once satisfied with his stance, swung the rod in a confident back-swing, then really loaded it on the forward cast. The heavy 2½-inch spoon flew for eighty yards across the smooth glide in front of us and, as it landed, he wedged the rod butt at the top of his thigh, tightened the line with a few rapid turns of the big fixed-spool reel and then let the current do the rest.

As the spoon fished round he turned to me and said, 'Good water, eh?'

I could only agree with him. The glide extended for at least a hundred and fifty yards across the river, at which point it abutted a rapid that raced in waves beside the right bank. A few hundred yards downstream these twin flows merged to form one great rapid, which was allowed only a few minutes' violent roistering before it was summarily halted and pacified by the Hardwar barrage a mile or so downstream, from whence it issued as great irrigation canals that gave life to the sun-scorched Plains below.

I had opted not to fish. I just wanted to look and listen and learn as much as possible from the group of anglers around me. Whilst the others joked and traded friendly insults as they fished, Mehta stood a little apart from the line of wading anglers and fished in silence. His eyes, I noticed, were forever scanning the far bank. I edged a bit further into the water towards him. He had paid me no further attention since making his comment, which I now felt was more for his own benefit



*Morris Mehta*

than for mine. I listened to the swish of the rod as he cast, and watched the long arc of the line catch in the rays of the late afternoon sun. Mehta, I understood, was getting on for seventy years of age. He fished with the vigour of a man forty years his junior. After twenty minutes of continuous, hard casting he turned and waded towards the bank, indicating that I should follow him.

He knelt on the boulder shore and began to sort through the boxes in his tackle bag. Among them was one full of plugs, all four to six inches in length, green- or brown-backed with golden flanks and orange bellies. These were the 'Morris's blasted plugs' that Reggie had talked about on the journey here and (jokingly) had asked me to pinch for him. Mehta spent most of each winter making them. They were beautifully constructed and finished and, above all, they were devastatingly successful. Mehta's friends were forever pleading with him for plugs, reminding him of anniversaries and birthdays — anyone's would do — and telling him that it was always better to give than to receive. He saw me looking at the lures.

'Not today,' he said. 'There are one-hundred-pound fish for certain in front of us today. These plugs will take them — better than any spoon — but they can't get the range we need here. A very heavy, deep-fished spoon is the only chance.'

'One-hundred-pounders?' I asked, sounding in my incredulity like some idiotic woman in a soap-powder commercial.

'Yes yes — and bigger. They have closed and drained Harikipauri. It's the great bathing ghat, across the river in Hardwar. There is a canal drawn off the river just over there ...' He pointed across to the rapid and a row of enormous black barges moored along the right bank. 'It is normally run down to the ghats — the steps where the Hindus bathe. A footprint of the god Vishnu is to be seen there ...' He stopped abruptly and flashed me a wicked, doubting grin that invited complicity. 'The canal became clogged with sand and boulders during the big monsoon we've just had and Harikipauri was running out of water. They closed the intake last week and the *enormous* mahseer that swim with the bathers in the canal have had to come out into the main river. That's why we're here.' Another grin. The man had eyes which must have broken the heart of many a girl in his youth. 'Besides them, the migrants are also back; the fish which were spawning the upper river, in the monsoon floods a couple of months ago, have returned to spend the winter. The river here is stiff with fish, but only the smaller ones lie this side. The big fish are in, or on, the edge of the rapids over there.'

'Can't you fish from the opposite bank?' I asked, I thought, quite sensibly.

'Oh yes, I suppose we could — for about five minutes before the sadhus, the holy men, tore us limb from limb. Religious feelings run high around here. They don't want us catching their sacred fish. Ridiculous thing is that a number of those fellows are nothing more than *goondas* — absolute thugs — who themselves organize the bombing of the River Song, a little upstream of the town.' He pulled a face. 'I say, it's time I did some fishing, or otherwise that scoundrel Ivan Mann will catch one before me!'

Morris put three or four spoons into the breast pocket of his shirt. We waded back into the pleasantly warm water and chatted together as he fished.

The next hour was a revelation. He spoke of the great fish that swam the Ganges: fish the size of a man, which were seldom hooked and, if they were, cleaned reels of just as many yards of line as they were capable of holding. A month before, he had had a mahseer empty a big saltwater reel of 350 yards of line, and it was still running hard when he cut the line to avoid losing the rod, or being pulled into the river himself. (A year or two earlier, a Delhi-based foreign diplomat fishing the Ganges had been dragged in and drowned. His body was never found.) In reply to my question of whether it could have been just a big fish — weighing, say, thirty or forty pounds — taking advantage of an even bigger current, he informed me that the previous week a mahseer had been brought to the Dehra Dun *mandi* (the town market) and offered for sale. That fish had weighed sixty-two kilos — not far short of 140 pounds. The successful local fishermen had said the fish broke through two nets before a third one secured it. The tone of Mehta's voice changed as he told me this story. It rose almost to the point of breaking, and when it finally did, the words poured forth in a wild torrent, like a river breaking through a failing dam.

'There are *monsters* in this river, I tell you!' he exclaimed, his eyes blazing with the fervour of a Welsh preacher. 'And when they take, they take like this ... *zzoop!*' At the same time he made a swift, grabbing motion with his hand. 'Then they run ...' He thrust the now-clenched fist away from him with a quick jabbing movement of the arm. 'Oh yes, they run, run like hell, and often you can't stop them — nothing can stop them. They just go, everything goes, until — *patak!* bang!— the line cracks at the drum-knot and you're left feeling like some bloody fool upon the bank!'

He gave me an embarrassed smile, then looked away to the river and fell silent. I felt my scalp lift in response. Never before had I seen such passion in an angler, yet I had known something similar in myself. I had once felt it for the salmon, fresh off the tide, streaming into the West Wales rivers — a wild fever that drove me for years until one day it passed and left me feeling weak and useless. A far stronger, more virulent fever still held Morris Mehta in its grip. I had seen the way he left the jeep on our arrival earlier — like a lurcher off the leash — to reach the river half a mile away ahead of the rest. Travelling to the river he was the most pleasant and sociable of men; on it he was a solitary, possessed and preoccupied. That afternoon I caught a bad dose of Mehta's Ganges Fever.

As we all gathered around a driftwood fire beside the Ganges that October evening, warming ourselves and eating a superb curry which Reggie's servant had prepared on the bank that afternoon, Morris issued his challenge. He told me of a place then, that, cold as I was, made me sweat. It was a spot called The Junction, which lay in the mountains many miles upriver. For no more than ten or twelve days each year, the place was haunted by monsters. Mahseer of thirty, forty, fifty pounds and bigger halted there and, if you were present when they did, these fish would run you all day until exhaustion put an end to the game and sent you staggering,

chastened, back to camp in search of sleep. Morris's account of The Junction made Charles Ritz's stories of the giant salmon of Norway (which have inspired me since I first read them as a six-year-old) seem tame in comparison. As the firelight played on the tired faces of my new-found friends and the crickets began their nightly chorus of chirp and hum and weird electronic whine, I made my decision and announced to the assembled company that one day I would return to the Ganges, find the great Junction and hit it.

* * *

Nearly two years later, as our train drew into Hardwar Station early one September morning, I kept that promise. On the station platform, vendors sold tea in little earthenware vessels, passengers lazed beneath great pipal trees in the soft, early-morning light; above them, in the branches and on every rooftop, brown rhesus macaque monkeys cavorted comically. India never sleeps. The railway station, the microcosm of life in this seething, fascinating country is a perpetual fairground: a place of sound and light, smoke, smells and movement. Beggars, tradespeople and travellers of every caste, creed and colour go about their lives: eating, sleeping, making deals, making love, giving birth and dying. Sheer unsanitized humanity. Mean, drab, unremitting poverty. For some, these are the 'exotic sights, sounds and smells' of the Indian holiday brochure. For many millions more, these forlorn scraps of existence are called Life.

The city sweltered in the post-monsoon heat. Few places could have offered a greater contrast to the fruit orchards and willow-hung trout streams we had left in Kashmir two days earlier. Hardwar is both an assault on the senses and an outright attack upon all your well-practised sensibilities. It is not a place for the squeamish or faint-hearted. Hardwar, the Gate of God, is venerated by hundreds of millions of Hindus on account of its location beside the gap in the Siwalik foothills through which *Ganga Mai*, Mother Ganges, leaves the Himalaya and begins her great journey across the northern Plains towards the Bay of Bengal. Each year, the holy city draws many to her and absolves them of their sins. They bathe with the great mahseer in the fifty-yard-wide canal that is Harikipauri Ghat, perform *darshan* and *puja* at the many shrines and temples in the prescribed fashion before returning to their distant homes, invigorated and refreshed. But some do not leave. They come here to make their peace with God then die, happy in the knowledge that Ganga Mai offers them certain forgiveness. Smoke rises from the macabre necropolis of the burning ghats at dawn. Prayers are said, garlands of flowers cast, the body on the pyre anointed with butter *ghee* (a product of the sacred cow) and, when the cremation is complete — and a period of two days has elapsed to allow the spirit of the deceased to quit this world for its heavenly resting place — the ashes are cast upon the waters. (On the morning that I witnessed this last ritual, one of the onlookers — a lovely young woman — swept a mane of raven-coloured hair from across her breast and began to

suckle her baby. Only India could produce such an image, as if on cue.)

India is a land of pilgrims. You encounter them everywhere. From the party of day-trippers visiting a country temple on a Tuesday holiday in southern India: all blaring radios and women in their saried finery. To a smaller, quieter group earnestly journeying to join a distant *yatra*, a major pilgrimage in which tens of thousands may participate. Such a spectacle cannot fail to inspire both longing and wonder, for here is an echo of our own unsettled past: a seductive reminder of a road snaking across a wide plain, of hills upon a distant horizon, of wind soughing in the treetops and of nights spent beneath a web of stars. The call of the open road still beckons to us, but the majority ignore its siren-song and stay at home — with varying degrees of success and happiness. For many Indians, however, the ancient call remains just as potently alluring. Each spring, thousands travel to Hardwar from all corners of the subcontinent and from there commence one of man's last great journeys: the pilgrimage to the shrines that lie at the source of the Ganges. The pilgrimage leaves in April, once the snows lying upon the high passes have cleared. As the snow-melt enters the river, staining its waters a pallid greyish-brown, another host begins to make preparations for departure. A far older, more elemental urge drives these pilgrims, but as yet the forthcoming journey is still only a flicker of a feeling, an increasing restlessness, mere whispers in the water. The mahseer of the Ganges await the onset of the monsoon before commencing their great spawning run upstream to the headwaters.

* * *

We provisioned our modest expedition in the seething bazaars of Hardwar town. There were five of us, three tents, some rods and reels and very little else. We haggled over necessities: rice, potatoes, vegetables, spices, tea, coffee, powdered milk and kerosene. The majority of stalls were bedecked with plastic jerrycans and aluminium or brass vessels: containers for the cure-all Ganges water that the pilgrims invariably take back to their villages. Further haggling secured the services of a taxi, one of the ubiquitous Ambassador cars, in reality the 1956-vintage British Morris Oxford, still made in India. It has the distinction of being the most indestructible car ever made. A member of our party had brought his Calcutta-made 350cc Enfield Bullet motorcycle. He rode this up the valley as four of us crushed ourselves into the impossibly laden car. In this inglorious and unconvincing fashion, we hit the Ganges.

As we left Hardwar, the low, forested spurs on either side of the river began to climb in anticipation of the mountains ahead. We travelled along a level road that ran through sal forest which, considering its proximity to the town, seemed an unlikely home for elephant and tiger. But in this area beside the Ganges, the improbable or impossible had become commonplace. Naked sadhus, clad only in a smear of ash and a string or two of beads, walked along the road carrying long-

shafted trident spears: symbol of the god, Shiva. They did so with good reason; for we were travelling now through the Siwalik — Shiva's Hills — into the part of the Himalaya that Hindu myth holds to be the god's earthly abode.

Shiva, the all-powerful procreator and destroyer, lord of the cosmic dance, has since time immemorial maintained an uneasy presence in the part of the human mind that Jung named the collective unconscious, serving as a constant reminder to us of our own inescapable mortality, and, as a consequence, the need to gather and store spiritual riches in this life to ensure a better incarnation in the next — the age-old cycle of life, death and rebirth. The early Christian church knew of dread Shiva (or a Middle-Eastern counterpart by a different name), and attempted through the Gospels to neutralize his powerful influence by transforming Jesus into a new Lord of the Dance. A faint echo of the older, darker origin is heard in Sydney Carter's pretty folk-song-hymn, 'Lord of the Dance', sung by millions of children throughout the Christian world today.

In Rishikesh itself, dozens of temples and *ashrams* (religious sanctuaries) — all spires, cupolas and colonnades and looking like great, garishly coloured iced cakes — lined the riverbanks. Here, all sense and logic had long since been abandoned: the place was bathed in a mad religious fervour. Yogis and ascetics lined the banks; the inscrutable images of gods stared out from temples at the thronging pilgrims; grotesque ladies, normally prim and modest to the extreme, shed their saris and wallowed whale-like in the waters; beggars bleated out their tales of woe. We looked at these scenes, then at one another, and detected doubt and fear in one another's faces. I played the part of leader and reassured my friends that all would be well upriver, away from this madness. I hoped that they believed me — because I didn't.

A little way above Rishikesh town lies Laxman Jhula, a footbridge across the Ganges which for over two thousand years has marked the true starting point of the pilgrimage to the shrines. We stopped a few hundred yards downstream of the bridge and found a vantage point upon a wooded bluff above the river. On the bluff our only company was a scrawny cat stalking lizards among the rocks. Assembling at the edge, we looked down at the river and at once were rendered speechless. At Hardwar, we had caught only a brief glimpse of the Ganges and to me it had looked little bigger than when I last fished it with Morris and Ivan two years before. But below us now was a mighty river in spate, and one that had clearly been detained against its will for far too long. Roaring out of this last Siwalik gorge, it careered round a tight bend above, boiled and heaved against the base of a steep, forested mountainside opposite, before giving up the assault and flinging itself down a set of rapids which beat down in great white-topped waves towards us. After several minutes we managed a few animated 'Wows!' and 'Jesus, look at thats!', before again falling silent. The river goddess in all her snarling fury was a truly awesome sight. Even Shiva himself had been unable to hold and keep the lady. Never before had I seen water so enraged. I reflected upon the fact that the river had fallen in level by

at least ten feet during the past two weeks. Then I could only marvel at the strength and endurance of the Ganges mahseer.

* * *

At first, they had milled about the river-mouths, the sickly ice-melt of the main river compelling them to seek the warm, clear, spring-fed waters of the tributaries. Great backs and flag-like dorsals periodically broke the surface. Palm-sized scales like golden bullseyes invited the sun's best shot. Gregarious three- and four-footers rolled to the rhythm of the entering flow. Below them, a single fish rocked the waters to a more leisurely beat — with a back almost half a yard wide. She swam a little apart from the shoal: alone. I could not take my eyes from her. My crude advances must have irritated her though, for not once did she acknowledge my existence. She and her lesser associates were merely biding their time.

At the end of the second week of June, a billow of dark cloud appeared from the south-west. Throughout the waiting land, its arrival heralded mass expressions of rejoicing and relief. The monsoon rains brought new life to the parched fields and ended the great heat that had gripped the North since the middle of April. As the first rain fell, people rushed out from their homes into the streets and sported themselves beneath the deluge. On and in the river, the response was more muted. The first fingers of the spate pushed leaves and straws and scummy, surface-floating dust down the side-valleys. At the confluences, backs and fins wriggled in expectation. Then a cow — which had died from neglect in the main street of a god-fearing town upriver — floated down, high upon the first of the rise. Great backs began to arch and jostle in the thickening flow. By evening the host was gone, lost to the whirling brown tide that now filled the valley.

Some fish had at once ascended the sidestreams in the surrounding foothills. A far greater number opted to travel on the monsoon to the distant headwaters. Here they would run the tributaries, the feeders, the runnels and the rivulets, the gutters and the gullies, in order to spawn. A Herculean task. I know a dependable man who once watched a pair of mahseer completely fill a narrow, flooded channel on the flanks of a mountain with their — the female's at least — five- or six-foot-long bulk. They literally shifted boulders in the throes of their passion. July and early August is the time. Thousands of mahseer breed beneath the cloud-hung peaks, in a world which man endures from under the dripping thatch of his village house, patiently awaiting the sun's return.

Just what is it about the slightly ridiculous act of fish reproduction? Anglers the world over sit and think uplifting thoughts about salmon cutting redds in the dark days of the declining year; of carp spawning in a messy churn of weed and lilies at the height of summer; or of the purplish-black forms of grayling upon the shadow-splashed gravels in April. I suspect it is because the mere knowledge of the continued existence of people and creatures we love is of great comfort to us. And if

their efforts to survive are considerable — fraught with danger perhaps, or dogged by adversity — then so much the better: we love drama and we need heroes. On a scale of one to ten, the Ganges mahseer spawning endeavour rates an eight — if the fish choose merely to spawn in the lower tributaries. And nothing less than a thirteen — a lucky one, we must hope — if they decide to go all-out for the upper river. I write now of one of the epic journeys of the natural world. Not of wildebeest crossing the minibus-haunted savannah of the Mara and Serengeti, but of an unseen host that journeys each monsoon from the sun-scorched Indian plain, for well over two hundred miles up one of the world's wildest rivers, to spawn somewhere in the sky among the peaks of the Himalaya. 'Just like salmon,' I once said to an audience of salmon fishers. Not so. Even fearless Salar the Leaper, I fear, would meet its match in the waters of upper Ganges.

* * *

Upon the bluff below Laxman Jhula, I pondered over the present whereabouts of the mahseer. With the cessation of the rains and a falling river, they would almost certainly be on their way down from the spawning-beds. However, I found myself praying now that these descending fish were still far upriver; somewhere downstream from the headwaters, but still many miles upstream from the Junction that lay several hours' drive up the valley from where we stood. But what if the fish had come down early this year? They might already be with us now; milling around the sacred precincts of Rishikesh, riding the last chutes down to Hardwar a few miles below, about to begin a long winter break with some very varied fare in prospect on the menu. Morris had warned me of this:

'Some years they're up and back downstream in just a few weeks. The upper river is empty of fish by early or mid-August. That's in a year of a late or deficient monsoon. In a big year they can stay up there until nearly the end of September, or — just as likely — come down early in the month, when the river is still big and totally unfishable. Whatever you do then, you can't win — you miss them either way. Oh, but if you hit it right!...'

His grin, then, was an inspiration.

There was only one way to find out: with a *'Challo!'* — 'Let's go!' — to the driver, we set off up the road that led into the forest-clad gorge.

* * *

Much of the winter of 1988/9 was spent agonizing about mahseer. Suddenly the film was 'on' and I had been asked to pin down exact dates for an eight-day shoot at the Junction in the late summer of 1989. The task would have been funny, if the very nice people with whom I was working had not been so deadly serious. A small fortune rode on my decision. Have you ever been asked to predict the exact time

*Ganges dawn*

and date the world will end, knowing that it will be you who gets the chop if you are wrong? You haven't? Well, my advice is to delegate the responsibility — fast! My problem was that I had been given the job.

For months those fish ran through my mind, finning through the disturbed waters of dreams, goggling at me glassy-eyed before continuing their slow drift down the Ganges to only Shiva knew where. I had been fortunate to find them before, but nine years had elapsed and much had happened to the fish, the river and the Himalaya in that time. Reports in the international press spoke of an environmental disaster occurring throughout the Himalaya, of massive deforestation in the upper watersheds resulting in flash floods ripping out whole mountainsides, of erosion and sediment deposition on a catastrophic scale. The deluge of 1978 had rung the alarm bells; for whilst India had had heavier monsoon rains in other years and had suffered extensive flooding of the Gangetic Plain as a result, the devastating floods of 1978 came as a complete surprise. In the distant fastnesses of the mountains, something had gone terribly wrong: man had overplayed his hand.

Since colonial times, successive Indian governments had tried to ignore a virtually insoluble problem: that of the country's huge, ever-growing population's demand for land. In the years which followed independence, politicians — just as venal in India (and perhaps a little more so) as anywhere else — handed over great tracts of virgin country to the landless, rubber-stamped excessive logging contracts, and generally adopted a cavalier attitude towards environmental and conservation issues in the

interests of short-term popularity at the polls and personal aggrandisement. The Himalaya, in the meantime, became a mountain desert. As a direct result, the Ganges — beloved of India's people, focus of their earliest racial memories, hopes and fears, and the quintessential symbol of their age-long culture and civilization — was surely dying.

I telephoned Linda Mitchell and told her that I felt the film should not go ahead until I had made a reconnaissance trip to the upper valley and seen the state of the place for myself. I think I went as far as to say that there might not be mahseer in the river for us to catch, or certainly too few to merit so costly an expedition. I left London for India early in May 1989. I had just ten days (all I could spare away from my business at its busiest period) in which to travel to the Ganges, visit the Junction and establish whether there was still a mahseer population of sufficient size to be worth fishing for. Peter Nicholson, a young and talented film-maker, was my companion on the trip. He would direct the film if it went ahead: his solo directorial debut. I very much wanted to fish in India again after a seven-year absence, For different reasons, therefore, we both had a marked interest in the continuing welfare of the Ganges mahseer.

The capital lay baking beneath a smudgy sun. The pall of smog which hung over the city reminded Peter of Los Angeles. That magnificent Lutyens-designed architectural set-piece of late British imperial confidence, New Delhi, and the occasional shambling camel or bullock cart, emphatically informed us otherwise. We could only be in India, region of superlatives, excesses and endless contradictions — a country, it seems, whose only consistency is its sheer, mind-boggling diversity, its plethora of vividly contrasting opposites. The ordered Western mind at once recoils from this madhouse of earthly horrors and delights, yet finds itself drawn back there time and again. I was glad to be back.

We slipped out of the city, and were away across the Plains before the first black kites took to the skies at dawn. The road ran straight between fine avenues of feathery tamarisk and the ubiquitous acacia. All around us the country was awakening. We stopped for tea at a roadside *dhaba*, a local teahouse-cum-restaurant. The proprietor appeared from a field to one side of the timber-and-thatch shack, fastening his trouser belt as he hailed us with a smile, the all-purpose *namaste* greeting, and a look of satisfaction upon his face. A sleeping figure, which had lain prostrate upon a charpoy bed in the open nearby, suddenly stirred, stood up and made off hurriedly towards the field, unfastening his belt as he went. (The women and girls had been to the fields a little earlier, in the darkness, for modesty's sake.) On seeing this, Peter felt less inclined to have a cup of tea. I assured him I would watch the preparation and ensure that it was well boiled. We sat on a crude wooden bench at the roadside and watched the daily story of the dusty Plains unfold before us. The early cows, goats, sheep, bicycles and pedestrians — the first of the endless raggle-taggle procession of rural India — wandered past; an early truck roared by; a horn-shrieking night coach bound for Delhi came down the other way.

It was all so familiar. I lit a cigarette and offered one to the watching proprietor in my faltering, rusty Hindi, and suddenly felt very much happier than I had done for a very long time.

By the time the sun had pierced the heat haze and the smoke of cooking-fires, and lit the land, we had covered more than half the distance to Dehra Dun. We sped between lines of eucalyptus and whitewashed kilometre-stones in high spirits. But, when we had seen a score of reeking villages and a host of bent-backed women clawing at the dust of tiny fields, this changed. Peter now looked shaken and grim, an expression that ill-became his exceptional, blond good looks. I tried to rally him with the promise that everything looks better in September, after the monsoon. A few minutes down the road, the plain began to green a little. Then, on the northern horizon, we thought we saw hills. It took a long hard look from us both to confirm their presence, to give certain substance to what might have been only a mirage, or just another gathering of dust-clouds. We turned in smiles to one another; they were real all right, these first outriders of the Himalaya.

Soon, we began to climb the winding road through the forested pass which led to Dehra Dun. I pointed out a rock ledge beside the road where, during the 1960s, a leopard had regularly lain in wait to swipe at passengers clinging to the outside of passing buses; and another lofty stone table upon which Ivan's father-in-law shot a tiger, over thirty years before. Peter's eyes widened then narrowed, shrewdly. For a moment I heard my own words in playback and, like him, at once recognized their improbability. A few miles back we had been travelling through a landscape resembling one of Bosch's visions of hell; yet here, suddenly in a very different world, I found myself speaking of unicorns. A beer in the hotel bar on arrival made India seem that much easier to comprehend.

Dehra Dun, though fast becoming just another seedy Indian town that had seen better days, obviously still took itself very seriously, and strove, in parts, to retain a certain old-fashioned schoolmarmish decorum and propriety. Smart, neatly dressed students, carrying satchels and munching *samosa* or *puris*, still browsed the English bookshops of Astley Hall, which leads off Clock Tower Square in the centre of town. The band of the Indian Military Academy, India's Sandhurst, still played at the Cambrian Hall School's annual sports day held each autumn, giving stirring renditions of 'Abide With Me' as the late-afternoon sun raked the playing fields and their crop of healthy young minds and bodies, causing the magnificent camphor trees to cast ponderous shadows across the acres of well-tended grass, before itself striking the windows of Mussoorie — the old hill station on a ridge above the town — and causing them to flash golden like a battery of heliographs, giving the place all the appearance of a twinkling fairy-tale castle. In Dehra Dun, new generations of Indian leaders and administrators are groomed and taught, in their turn, to bear the white man's former burden.

Next morning I telephoned Morris Mehta. I had not seen him in nine years.

Dorothy, his wife, answered my call and informed me that Morris had been seriously ill for some time. He nevertheless very much wished to see us, for he welcomed the prospect of a film about what I knew to be his other great love, the Ganges mahseer. We agreed to meet as soon he felt well enough to see us. In the meantime, Peter and I went to meet senior officials at the Forest Research Institute of India, at the headquarters of the recently expanded Rajaji National Park in the Siwalik Hills (through whose precincts a once good stretch of the Ganges ran), and at the Wildlife Institute of India. At the end of these meetings, with what undoubtedly were highly qualified and dedicated people, we really wished we had not heard much of what they had to say. There was some good news, but there was also much that was bad. I could not help feeling that whilst the Indian government had realized the error of its ways and, as if to atone for past sins, was diverting money, skills and resources into halting environmental decline and the restoration of the Indian Himalaya, it had acted too late: the various projects were mere exercises in closing the stable door after the horse had bolted. Perhaps I was responding too negatively to these very positive people, perhaps there was still hope for the Ganges and its fish, its surrounding forests and their wildlife. Morris, as a fine angler and an experienced man in the field, would be able to tell us the real story.

'The fishing is finished,' he said simply when we met two days later. 'It's all gone. The Song and Suswa streams, Satnaryan, Ghori Ghat, Raiwala, Laljiwala ... Chila ... all the old spots I showed you ... all gone. Lost to either the new national park, where the guards are trained to protect animals and not fish, and where the poaching still goes on — except now there are no rod-and-line anglers present to move the poacher fellows on. Angling has been banned within the park, by some damn-fool official somewhere who thought it would benefit the mahseer. Yes yes! And now it's all being bombed to hell — we see the fish on sale in town. Dehra Dun anglers go away to fish other rivers now. Think of it, Paul. This was India's angling Mecca!' The illness had quenched none of his fire, though it burned now in a much thinner, pain-drawn face.

I glanced across at Peter; he looked almost as sick as I felt.

'But what of the upper river, Morris?' I persisted. 'What has happened at the Junction? Surely *some* fish must still get up on the monsoon and stop there when coming down!' With an engaging waggle of the head, he raised his eyebrows and gave me an enigmatic, tight-lipped smile.

'Your guess is as good as mine. The lower confluence — remember it? — produced a few fish last year. No one has been up to the Junction itself for some time. The fish are up and down so quickly, you wouldn't believe it. The river has changed, Paul. It rises so fast and high nowadays, then runs right off in just a few days. It used to take weeks. Have you thought of the Beas? I've not fished it since the sixties, but you caught fish there, didn't you?'

'We need a big fish for the cameras, Morris. I don't think the Beas could produce the fifty-six-pounder you had then. A twenty-pounder would be a miracle.'

The three of us sat with our tea and biscuits in the bungalow sitting room, in silence, gloomily fishing the air for inspiration. At length, I looked at Peter and shook my head. The film project was all over, bar the shouting. Morris saw the look that passed between us, then spoke.

'You mentioned earlier you were planning to visit the Junction. I think you should. We Dehra Dun anglers cannot help you now, but the villagers there perhaps could. They can tell you if the fish still run and at what time they do. It's your only chance.'

His eyes fixed me, and I saw both a flicker of hope and challenge in their charged darkness. We left Dehra Dun for the upper river next morning.

* * *

There were four of us in the car that set off up the road into the gorge: a driver, Peter, me, and Dinesh, a young Nepali manager with the tour firm providing ground arrangements for the film shoot if it went ahead. After the despair that had gripped us the previous afternoon at Morris's, just being on the move again quickly rallied our spirits.

We travelled through a land of round-topped and saw-edged hills. Far below to our right, the Ganges ran at feverish pace. A fine forest marched on each side of the river for a few miles above Rishikesh, until it reached the boundary of the national park where the trees faltered and quickly began to thin. Here, at an altitude of below 1000 metres, the present law could offer them no protection; these low-altitude forests would only benefit from the total ban on tree felling, irrespective of altitude, promised by the year 2000. Until then, I reflected, the hill people would continue to cut timber for heating and cooking, and pursue the traditional way of life (subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry and small-scale exploitation of forest products) that had been sustainable when their numbers were small. The recent arrival of land-hungry Plains-dwellers rang the death knell for these hills and, in turn, their inhabitants — the rains, the runoff and the erosion would see to that.

We fell into conversation about the fate of this gorgeous country, and soon I found myself suffering from a condition that besets almost every foreign traveller in India: a tendency to experience violent shifts in mood. In a few minutes my positive, almost euphoric state had turned to one of sadness and anger. In my early travelling days I would have accepted responsibility for this; since then, I had found that no one — not even the most inveterate optimist — is spared. So powerful is the Indian experience (like a distillation of all of life's emotional highs and lows administered in one massive knock-down dose) that it can very rapidly push the human mechanism near to breaking point.

The upper valley had aged markedly in the years I had been away. Now, it looked gaunt and grey and ill used: a wasteland of scalped hills, scratched with stony paths and gouged by crumbling terraces. Next month's monsoon would bring

a flush of greenery to its ravaged features, disguise a scar here, mask a web of wrinkles there, in the way that artfully applied cosmetics do; but it was painful to see the old lady now, so dishevelled and unprepared. I think all of us wanted to tender our apologies, quickly take our leave and return at a more convenient time. I pored over a map as we neared our destination, knowing that the number of hours travelled had brought us close, yet finding myself unable to distinguish one sun-seared valley from another. We stopped and asked directions from a solitary pedestrian who was braving the trucks that thundered down the road from a dam construction site upriver. 'You're there,' he said with a gap-toothed smile and promptly jumped into the back seat of the car beside Peter and me. A mile further on we stopped at the bend that lay above the Junction.

We sat in the shade on the stone steps of a cottage set a little way back from the road. Our passenger had given us a pitcher of cool spring-water to drink and was at this moment making tea in the darkened room behind. From our precipitous vantage point we looked down into a vast bowl among the hills, where the great river made a sudden and extremely compressed S-shaped bend and where, on one tight loop of this watery character, it was met by a narrow, steep-sided valley from which issued a stream that flowed across a bone-white field of rocks and sand before losing itself in the Ganges. We stared for a long time in silence, ignoring the dirty half-strength river, the sparse, heat-hazed hills and the myriad eyesores of the prevailing drought, and instead painted the scene with the greens, rich browns and silver-blues of a colour photograph I had taken from this very spot nearly nine years before. 'What do you think?' Peter said at length, not averting his gaze. I wobbled my head in the local fashion. 'I think we should get absolutely eradicated on the duty-free tonight and worry about things in the morning!' He nodded in agreement.

Daylight saw Peter, Dinesh and me make the biggest hash of loading a baggage mule ever seen in the Garhwal Himalaya. Chanda Singh, the local muleteer, stood by and watched our efforts in bemused silence. At length, we stepped back from the mule and admired our handiwork, as fine a piece of macramé as one could hope to see. 'Okay Chanda, *challo!*' I said. Chanda cracked the mule on the rump with his staff and loosely waved the animal in the direction of the river. The mule, with memories of its work-colleagues at leisure browsing in their stalls back home, set off up the road in that direction, shedding the load within the first sixty yards and giving its enraged master a pretty good run for at least another half-mile. Were it not for the condition of my head this morning, the spectacle would have been funny; as it was, I had to look away to avoid further pain.

We set off down the path that led into the valley, walking a narrow corridor through the heat, glare and cicada-shrill. Sweat saturated our backs within minutes, causing my bright new day-pack to dye a white T-shirt (and the skin beneath it) a livid red. The shade temperature was thirty-eight degrees Celsius and, if the painful brilliance of the early sun was anything to go by, it would surely rise to forty-five by midday. 'Of course, you will fry at this time of year,' Morris had said, from his

armchair in the fanned coolness of the bungalow sitting room, adding with relish, 'It will be Hell!' For not the first time on my travels, I asked myself whether mere fish — those cold, stupid, slimy creatures that virtually no one loves unless they're filleted — were worth all this discomfort. Today, with an unswerving conviction, I knew they were not.

Soon, feeling the effects of incipient dehydration, my brain began to run a series of disparate images: those of faces from the past and of places visited long ago. I recalled the other journey I had made here, remembering it as something very different from the baptism of fire we were experiencing today: that journey, nine years earlier, had seemed — still seemed — like a voyage into wonderland, into a world born anew. I attempted to describe it to Peter as we trudged along.

* * *

The mules had arrived at dawn. From the damp chill of our tents, we heard first the distant clamour of their bells, then, a few minutes later, Chanda Singh's impassioned cries of 'Mulee ... mulee woah. Woah! ... *Mulee!*' I put a bleary eye out of the tent-flap and found a land transformed. Mist lay in teased-out strands across the valley, cloud balloons were tethered to distant peaks, the air was clear and still, and the silence only broken by the muted roar of the river far below. The five of us quickly struck camp and began the descent. The three mules, which had raced off ahead, were soon lost to sight beneath a long bolster of cloud that in the night had rolled down the field terraces to fill the lower valley. Anita and I tackled the first scree-slope together, hand in hand, skidding down the saturated rocks and shale in chaotic fashion, responding to each advance or ankle-turning fall with a mixture of laughter and profanity. Of the footpath just a few hundred yards away, we yet knew nothing. However, after twenty minutes of very inelegant scrambling, we struck its slanting course along a wooded and scrub-grown hillside that lay high above the narrow gorge through which the Ganges ran. Through the mist which still lay in the valley bottom, we glimpsed the twin piers of the old suspension bridge that here crossed a much attenuated, mere eighty-yard-wide river. The sun had just struck the tops of the stone cable-towers and was presently ragging at a skein of cloud that hung beneath them. If a dragon had risen out of the smoking depths then, we would have not been surprised.

At the bridge, we just stood and gaped. Below us ran a river of quite terrible strength. Its waters did not twist or turn, wasting their energy on an extravagant flourish or comely backward twirl; they surged, with the single-minded purpose of a creature anxious soon to be somewhere else. At Rishikesh the river had put on a display of showy violence, and we were impressed. Here, her character was different; she had about her an air of purposeful brooding, one of great control. Anger lay coiled within her slim, hard body, biding its time. I dared not tell her now that this was all for nothing; that later, just a few short miles after she had found

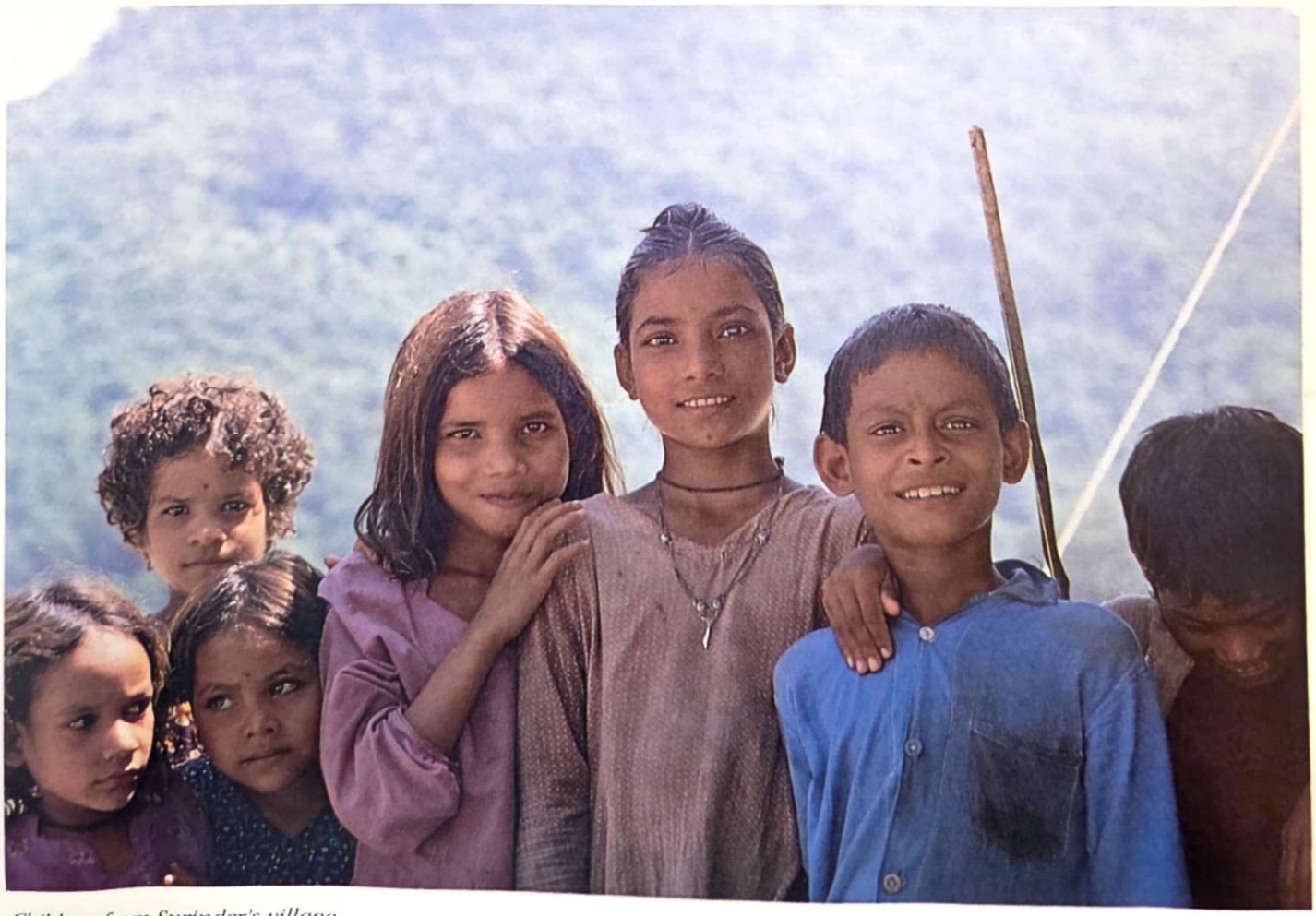
herself, she would be harnessed and tramelled once again.

Being so near to water at last, I began to think again of fishing and, oddly, about the ten-foot, two-piece spinning rod in its cloth bag that I now carried with me and was using as a walking stick. This rod, nine years before (my life seems to have been led in nines and threes), had landed a twenty-seven-and-a-half-pound salmon from a bank-high Hampshire Avon one gusty spring day. The honey-coloured fibreglass then had bent comfortingly through into the corks and for twenty-five minutes made a strong line sing in the cool air. And when the gaff had done its terrible work, and the deep-shouldered fish lay gleaming in death upon a bed of yellow kingcups, I hid the rod in the spinney that lay beside the Island Pool and walked back to the old millhouse where I was living. The salmon lay slung across my shoulder, against my back, wrapped in my waxed-cotton jacket, a loop of bailer twine around the tail wrist and my own. I walked home via the woods and the backways, trying to appear casual and unburdened, for had the estate gamekeepers caught me, not only would my job have been forfeit but my short-term health besides. I had permission to fish the water for salmon; but any fish that I might take, rightfully belonged to the season rod-holder, a gentleman in London, unable to fish today due to pressure of work or — more likely — an understandable reluctance to face the elements.

That night I sold the fish to the chef of a hotel on the London Road. I collected the rod, rain-soaked and splashed with pheasant droppings after its night beneath the trees, the following morning. I met Tom the head keeper coming down the river as I walked back. 'There's a fish down at the Island. Did you see him?' he said, his narrow eyes fixing mine. 'Yes, I saw him,' I said, turning my reddening cheeks into the southerly gale. 'Good, he said. 'He's twenty-five pounds if an ounce. I'll offer him a seafood special.' He gave me a knowing wink. I had taken the salmon on a 2½- inch, blue-and-orange, wooden devon minnow which I had turned from a piece of broom handle one February night in the woodwork room of the local school. I thought about this as I walked back to the mill. My fish had at least fallen to a spinning lure and this, I reasoned, went some way towards legitimizing my crime — besides, if I hadn't caught it, that salmon would only have fallen to the keeper's prawn. And I also made a decision: never to fish in proxy for another angler again. I lived with my secret for nine years; until this day, when, standing on a bridge across the Ganges, I felt a sudden and overwhelming need to confess. I told the story to my companions as we sat at a wayside teahouse on the other side of the river.

Just why a teahouse existed in this remote spot exercised our minds for several minutes until we realized that it was located beside an important highway: the ancient pilgrim-path whose beginnings we had seen at Laxman Jhula. Long before a road was built on the right bank of the river, this footpath (which followed the left bank) had been a major thoroughfare for the millions of pilgrims who, over the centuries, had padded along its winding course on their way to the shrines. This old *chai khana* was nothing more than an early roadhouse, transport café or service area

*Clear water from the tributary pushes into the Ganges at The Junction, briefly forming the two-tone river. Surinder Kumar and the deaf-mute boy in the foreground*



*Children from Surinder's village*

*A magnificent, rock-hard Ganges fish of 30½lb*

*A minority of Himalayan* putitora *mahseer have greatly enlarged lips. The reason is unknown*

— call it what you will — for pedestrians. However, due to the popularity of the new motor road and a dearth of modern pilgrims willing to suffer the hardships of a journey on foot, its trade was dwindling rapidly. When Peter, Dinesh and I stopped here in 1989 the ashes in the clay ovens were, at best, several months old; the blackened pots and little tea glasses were gone; the wooden benches, worn smooth by generations of weary pilgrims, broken or overturned. In 1980 it was different. The proprietor greeted us cheerfully, gave us tea, listened with polite incomprehension to my bout of salmon poaching angst, then readily answered questions about our chances of catching mahseer. In turn, he asked (and we told him) about ourselves — where we came from, what we did, our marital status, personal ambitions and hopes for the future: the age-old exchanges of travellers meeting on the road.

After a steep ascent from the bridge, the track dropped slowly to the narrow valley floor, widened to almost a cart's width, and then ran level. The harsh stones at our feet turned quickly into soft white sand. To our right ran the bright-metal track of the river. On our left lay a continuous braid of wooded hillside, lush after rain, alive with birdsong and the frantic leapings of langur monkeys. Butterflies floated on the air; I recognized the pied Indian Crow and Peacock varieties in their number. The morning sun flickered through the canopy of branches, dappling the track before us in leaf-light; for long minutes we walked like figures in a Sisley landscape. The air was rich with the aroma of damp vegetation and moist earth; the odours of woodsmoke and crushed curry plant leaves drifted from a hamlet somewhere downriver. (The memory of certain smells, I find — more than any sight or sound — can really tug the heart-strings.) In due course we came to the hamlet: two stone-built, slab-roofed cottages with the sounds of domestic life coming from their open doors; a tiny Shivaite temple; a decaying pilgrim *chatti* (resting-house) with an iron milestone set in the outside wall; and three men lazing, two cows munching and one calf sucking — all gathered together in a pool of shade. I was entranced. So too was one of my companions, a spoiled and already world-weary nineteen-year-old; for the first time in months, he shut up.

A mile further on, the valley unfolded. A vast amphitheatre lay before us; its towering walls and tiers of seats the mountain forests; the field of combat a wide expanse of shimmering rocks and sand, incised by the sweep of two converging rivers: the Junction, at last. Here, after pitching camp and putting up the rods, we awaited the arrival of the gladiators.

* * *

It was with no less a sense of relief and trepidation that Peter, Dinesh and I set off from the same vantage point to walk down to the village which lay beside the Junction. We crossed a stream that fell in a series of rocky cascades down a side-valley at the village outskirts, rendering the narrow strip of land beside the Ganges here a lush oasis of rice paddy, *karamani* millet and maize. Below the plank bridge,

in what had formerly been a spate scour filled with boulders and rank with wild cannabis, there was now a plant nursery. Hundreds of tree seedlings, a foot or so high, lay in well-ordered trays and were at this minute being watered by a small boy wielding a hosepipe. We halted. Peter looked at me in astonishment. The social forestry project we had heard about at the FRI a few days before actually did exist outside the imagination of the planners. The villagers here were raising rosewood, pine and sal seedlings for a large-scale reafforestation programme in the district. With a little more hope than we had hitherto been willing to allow ourselves, we entered the village.

At a first inspection little had changed. The dhaba still sold glasses of woodsmoked tea, the little houses still had their unkempt medieval look, the hill people their fine, high-cheekboned features and — the older ones at least — a polite diffidence. Soon we had collected a crowd of onlookers, children and youths mostly; a few of the latter, surly and shifty-eyed, made comments about us among themselves. A young woman passer-by overheard them and was swift and sharp in her rebuke. The youths fell into cowed silence then drifted away. A group of men engaged us in conversation as we drank a second tea. One of their number, eager to communicate, gabbled at us, first in broken English then in scarcely better Hindi, before falling strangely silent as if suddenly words eluded him altogether. Another spoke of a wedding in the village that morning and we at once knew the reason for their uncharacteristic forwardness: a good measure of strong country liquor. Yet, unlike the drunks of the Plains, these hill men intended no offence. Once they had learned enough to tell their wives and families back home, they courteously withdrew and let us go on our way.

A scatter of metal poles and glass insulators lay among the weeds at the edge of the village street. The power, we were told, had advanced as far as a neighbouring hillside; it would be connected soon. Further on, in a recently cleared circle, among the kneeling cattle and a group of children playing whip-and-top, a battered bus was parked. A newly constructed *kachha* (dirt) road, which hugged the steep-walled valley of the major tributary, now allowed access to and from the village in all but the monsoon months. A small town with a hospital and pharmacy lay just forty minutes distant. The villagers naturally welcomed the changes. I reminded myself that I did too.

At the far end of the village we forded the tributary. A couple of hundred yards upstream to our left it was crossed by a bridge, redundant in the present drought which had reduced this normally swift, forty-yard-wide river to a mere ankle-deep trickle. The Ganges lay across the pebbled valley floor a hundred yards away to our right. In this season it absorbed the entering stream without so much as a break in its stride. Paying insufficient attention to my paddling, I slipped on the greasy stream-bed. As my arms cartwheeled for balance, tiny fish sprayed across the shallows before us in alarm. I sat down in the water and let out a whoop. The fish were mahseer. The river was alive.

We unpacked the mule and put up the tents. Peter recorded the scene with his camcorder, then entertained a group of small boys with its viewfinder playback facility. Their eyes widened in wonder as they saw themselves for the first time. I left them and walked down to the river.

Alone on the beach beside the Ganges, memories gathered over me like stormclouds. I saw the faces of my former companions, heard their shouts and screams of alarm and delight as they were whirled around the back-eddy at the Junction; watched a much fuller, brighter river rush past, nag at a sandbar on the far-bank forest edge, before going on to thrash the bare shoulders of old Black Rock two hundred yards below. I fancied I caught the chatter of the lovely village girls as they bathed upriver, the cry of a peacock, the insistent chirring of a running reel. Had it happened? And if it had, was it all so long ago? In a different life? To someone else, perhaps? My life now seemed so staid and stale in comparison. 'Never go back,' said the voice of a distant friend. *'Barra machhi, sahib,'* I heard another say, and felt the touch of a hand upon my shoulder. I turned, expecting to find no one, but saw a dark face above me, its teeth the neon in an eager smile. A face from the past. I grasped the hand. *'Barra machhi*, Surinder!' I cried, scrambling to my feet. We grinned madly, held one another at arm's length for a few seconds, and then embraced. Arm in arm we retreated up the beach towards the camp. I had some introductions to make.

Surinder Kumar had been just eighteen when we had last met. A quiet, caring boy, he lived in a village set atop the cliff that lay just downstream of the meeting waters. On my earlier visit he had offered invaluable assistance as a guide and as an intermediary in our dealings with the two neighbouring communities. He was twenty-seven now, married with three small children, and hardly looked a day older. Peter and Dinesh shook his hand and polite smiles were exchanged. Dinesh, fluent in Hindi, chatted with him for some time, telling him first a little about himself and of his home in Nepal, then about us and the purpose of our visit. Surinder listened in silence, his face adopting the reserved, somewhat cautious look common in his people, until it was suddenly illuminated and transformed by a smile of understanding, approval and pleasure. A further bout of handshaking ensued. Dinesh asided to Peter, 'We've got a good man here.'

'I know,' I said. 'He helped us fight quite a battle, nine years ago.' Peter looked at me, in enquiry. I shook my head. 'Later, not now. Dinesh, ask him about the fish.'

Their rapid Hindi soon lost me, but I caught words in the dialogue such as *barra machhi*, big fish, and *sarpada*, the local name for mahseer — a word so frequently heard during the earlier visit that I had not bothered to record it in my journal. Over the passing years the frailty of human memory had deprived me of a piece of information I might have contributed to the old, but now defunct debate upon the origins of *Barbus tor*'s common name. Whilst some had maintained the word mahseer was derived from the Sanskrit word *matsya*, meaning simply 'fish', many others held that *maha siras*, big-headed, was a more likely root. The Garhwali name,

*sarpada*, which I heard again now — a composite of *sar*, head, and a corruption of *bada*, big — seemed to count more strongly in favour of the latter school.

After several minutes, Dinesh turned to me and spoke.

'Surinder says there are still mahseer here, but not as many as there were, that September is the month, and — oh yes — if anyone can catch them, you will. He thinks you're a man who makes his own luck and gives it to others!'

I watched Peter's face brighten and felt my own flush in embarrassment.

'Gentlemen, I think we have a film,' Peter said, half a minute later.

We tried to be very British about it. We shook hands and made faces that signalled tight-lipped, manly joy. It was only later, sprawled out on the sand, having downed several measures of a proprietary Scottish stimulant, that the laughter and incoherence we all craved happily began.

Next morning, before the sun had appeared from behind the great mound of a hill that loomed above the upper village, we were packed and on our way. Having crossed the tributary, we climbed the steep bank beyond. Along the top, itself a third of the way up a mountainside, ran the dirt road which led from the suspension bridge two hundred yards to our right. We went to the left, walked for a minute, then halted at a bend where the road turned away from the river to lead into the village. From this bend we could take a last look at the valley floor below: the swirling, chocolate-milkshake Ganges, the virtually empty trough in the gravels through which the tributary ran, the wide, sprawling beaches and — around, above and beyond them — the walls of pumice-white cliff and forest. We produced cameras and captured the scene. Then, as if reading my thoughts, Peter spoke.

'Paul, what did you mean when you talked about a battle here, nine years ago? You said you would tell me later.'

'Last night wasn't the right time, and I'm not certain if I should tell you now. This whole venture is such a gamble anyway, I didn't wish to give you, and particularly Linda, any further cause to get cold feet.'

'Tell me,' he said.

Then I told him the whole, bitter truth about our last days on the Ganges in 1980.

It had all started when we began to catch mahseer. We kept the occasional small fish to eat, and a few more as gifts for the neighbouring communities; the rest, that is the great majority (which included all of the larger fish), were released alive. The villagers naturally considered our conduct eccentric; indeed, a number felt it to be nothing short of insane. In past years they had seen the sahibs from Dehra Dun fill their stringers with mahseer over the course of several days, keep the fish alive during that period, then hastily leave one morning to reach their homes and freezers by nightfall. They could understand and accept this practice, but to see good fish being tipped back into the river was quite beyond their comprehension. However, relations were kept sweet by our gifts of fish and the diplomatic initiative of an intermediary, Surinder Kumar, a youngster who had adopted us on arrival.

Increasingly our activities were watched by a group of young men from the upper village. From them we learned of their plans to escape a future here, which, they felt, only offered homespun cotton clothes and long days with the plough. They wanted the modern life: that of denim jeans, movie-houses, speedy scooters and even faster women, promised in abundance by the cities of the Plain. To these young men, desperate to leave but trapped by lack of funds, our arrival must have seemed just the ticket. However, as they saw us catch and then release mahseer, their good humour changed. To them our fish represented hard cash: their only way out of the valley. They demanded a fish. The situation at once threatened to turn ugly, so I killed a big one — a twenty-pounder — and gave it to them. A day later they demanded all our fish. We refused. In turn, they threatened to dynamite the Ganges as we fished (a futile exercise in fishing terms on account of the river's present size and volume); but we knew they could and almost certainly would for they had been bombing the tributary for several days. Surinder interceded on our behalf, but they offered him only violence. In turn, he took us to see the elders of their village, who apologized and expressed their grave concern at what was happening. One of the group, they told us, an older man in his mid-twenties and built like a fighting bull, had spent time in Hardwar and earned himself a violent reputation there. They were powerless to stop the bad influence he was having upon a whole generation of their young men.

We left the next morning. As we halted to turn back for a last look, the river blew up before us. Men scurried into the water with baskets; one staggered out with a fish of about ten pounds, the rest went fishless.

I finished telling this story as we reached the village bus stand. It was a full minute before Peter spoke.

'And what about now?' he said. 'Can we expect the same?'

'We could, if we weren't coming back with such a large, well-organized party. In addition, the Forest Department and police will know about us, so any bad boys living locally — or those who might come up from the towns for a quick killing — will keep away.'

Peter nodded pensively, and walked on.

Three days later I was back in Britain.

**Chapter Ten**

# The Watershed

Paul Boote

Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he;
and I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
and I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.

They cut me down and I leap up high,
I am the life that'll never, never die;
I'll live in you if you'll live in me;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

Sydney Carter, 'Lord of the Dance'

Work occupied me for the rest of that summer. During those months I recognized the truth in the warning given me five years before by my old friend, Alan Tomkins: 'It will stop you from going fishing, Paul. And wreck all the enjoyment when you do. Three years from now you'll be playing golf!' And now, although I had not taken to wearing loud sweaters or pontificating from a bar stool at the nineteenth hole, I knew what he meant. My business (to which Alan referred) had become a tyranny. If I discussed line-guide spacings with a client for nearly an hour just one more time, then, so help me, I would kill! When the film trip's August departure date arrived at last, I recorded a 'Gone Fishing' message on my answerphone, and fled to India.

For two weeks John and I fished for trout in Kashmir before Peter's all-seeing eyes and a brace of equally remorseless cameras. Mostly it was glorious fun, yet there was a practical reason for our presence in a region that lies to the north of the Himalayan range and, as a result, in its rain-shadow: from here we could keep an eye on the progress of the monsoon to the south, and make our move when the rains failed. At the end of the fortnight, with the first part of the documentary completed, we returned to Delhi. After a night's rest, we travelled the Plains road to Dehra Dun.

Heavy rain had fallen in the town on each of the previous six days. The place was awash. The sun squinted briefly through a dome of cloud to greet us on arrival, but in the afternoon we had a shower — at least that is what the hotel manager called it: in minutes the garden and lawns became a lake, the Mussoorie Hills across the valley were consumed in a swirl of darkness, tin roofs rang. Later, in the night, we had rain. I was asleep when it began. I awoke thinking the end of the world had

happened and that some cosmic fire brigade was now hosing down the ashes. I understood then what an old India hand once told me: that there is rain, and there is monsoon rain, and you do not really know rain until you have experienced the latter. I lay there and tried to imagine the state of the Ganges at the Junction after this deluge. We were to leave Dehra Dun for the river in four days. We had then just a further eight days in which to catch mahseer before the crew returned to Britain. If the rains persisted for another few days the Ganges might remain in spate for a fortnight, and by the time it came into ply both fish and fishermen would be gone. I slept little for the rest of the night.

Dehra Dun's task in the making of the film was to provide an interesting character or two, some historical background, and plenty of local colour. Peter felt that in Morris Mehta he had found all three. We crammed into his sitting room the following afternoon: Peter, John Bailey, Dinesh, me, Linda, John Shann the first cameraman, Joe his assistant, genially avuncular George, our sound man, and Freni, the production assistant from Delhi. A rug depicting Jesus the Good Shepherd hung on the wall behind the sofa and armchair on which John, Morris and I were to sit and discuss fishy matters, over a cup of tea, before the cameras. I began the conversation and, immediately, Morris, a fine raconteur, gave us the works: the mahseer, the once glorious fishing in the rivers of the Doon, their sudden decline, the destruction of the watershed, and the bombing. I sensed the crew warm to him immediately.

Then he told his stories. First, the one about the leopard which closely followed him along a beach as he returned (carrying a catch of fish) back to his friends who, for no reason that he could think of, had suddenly dropped their fishing rods and were now frantically waving in his direction. And next, the story of the poacher he caught dynamiting the River Song behind the munitions factory near Dehra Dun. When apprehended the man, a poor villager, merely smiled and said with telling accuracy: 'Sahib, what is the difference? I just bomb the fish. You hang them on a line.' Then came the vulture story, and the one about the tiger and, finally, the tale of the visiting VIP. There were moments in that hour when John Shann had to look away, blinking, from from his camera eyepiece, when George's own giggle ruined the soundtrack, and when I remembered a story Morris had told me years before, which started me laughing at a most inopportune time.

Morris looked pale and tired when Peter announced the end of the filming, but he nevertheless took John Bailey through to a back room where a row of white-undercoated plugs, the latest batch, hung from a line above his workbench. He offered John advice about the necessity of walking up mahseer after their first great run and not, on any account, attempting to winch a fish back upstream with the rod and reel until this had been done; and he counselled us again not to neglect to fish the run and rapid about the great rock — Black Rock — that lay downstream of the confluence. Then he saw us to the door. I waited until the rest had gone before I took my leave.

We stood together outside. The conversation suddenly faltered. I remarked on how fine the garden looked in a brief splash of afternoon sunshine. He appeared not to hear this but merely took my hand, pressed it in a quick firm grip, held my eye fiercely with his for a second, then rather abruptly gestured me away towards my waiting friends. I walked down the gravel path in confusion. At the gate, I turned and called, 'Thank you, Morris!'

He made another dismissive gesture and, with a grimace of a smile, barked, 'Be off with you now, and catch some fish!'

It was only then I understood. That Morris knew he would not see the Junction again and, in his own proud way, had tried to tell me as much. Knowing that he would never again hear the rumble of the full river from afar, or from a high eyrie on the pilgrim path watch its waters dance and sparkle in the clear autumn light, he had done everything in his power to help me in my search. Now, I knew I had to journey up the valley on his behalf, and that he would be there before me as I walked the narrow trails, and beside me as I waded the swirling waters. In this way we would fish the Ganges together for a last time.

Rain fell virtually non-stop for the next thirty-six hours. News came from the confluence that the river had risen by more than fifteen feet and had completely flooded the camp in which we were to sleep the following night. We postponed our departure by another day and scanned the southern skies for a chink in the gloom. Morale was low and tempers brittle as we watched the film surely slip away from us with every drop of rain that fell.

The day of our departure dawned bright. The sun had shone for a few hours the previous afternoon, making the streets steam and the hills stand in sharp-etched relief against a strip of deep-blue sky hung with fluffy white rags of cloud. But we were inconsolable now and refused to believe such belated promises. However, the new rainless day survived breakfast, was observed through dirt-streaked bedroom windows to be still prospering as we packed, and later fairly roasted us as we loaded the coach with a small mountain of baggage. As we made our way out through the town, sweepers were cleaning the streets; citizens — unencumbered by waterproof or umbrella — walked the pavements; cows, crows and pi-dogs were about, in the open and actively on the scavenge. No one spoke. No one dared to voice what we had all just begun to suspect: that it was over, that the last-gasp monsoon had moved off north to make trouble elsewhere.

A huge brown river heaved below us at Laxman Jhula. John stood in silence for a full two minutes before emitting a scant 'Oh God!' Peter threw me a searching look. I shook my head; I could offer no answers. The coach laboured on up the road. All about us the valley luxuriated in a new set of clothes; till now I had not known there could be so many shades of green. Waterfalls shot through the foliage, plunging in white plumes of spray down sheer rock walls. It took me a while to recognize what made this scene not just picture-postcard pretty, but simply magical. It was as if the

entire landscape was breathing a sigh of relief and as it did so was exhaling vapour: a fine-grained vapour which lay thick and heavy upon the valley bottom, flowed in rippling folds across its flanks, before rising to lightly cover the high breasts of the peaks; and at each of these places, and with devastating effect, it was suffused and transformed by the rays of a bright, new sun. Our stunned silence was broken when someone, almost reluctantly, mentioned the film. Only then were the cameras made to roll.

Chanda Singh greeted us at the roadhead. With him were fifteen mules. I hardly dared look as they set off fully laden down the track in a welter of flying hooves, with Chanda's cries of exhortation and outrage driving them on. In addition, we were awaited by twenty-three high-altitude porters from Tehri Garhwal: good-humoured, tough, wiry young men, but unused to the intense heat of these — to them at least — low foothills. They fell upon the coach and picked it clean of baggage in the time it took me to change the film in my camera. Thus, a fair-sized horde set off from the road for the Junction, John and I in its midst. We were to be intercepted at points along the trail by the film crew, who had gone on ahead. The spectacle we presented was like something from a Rider Haggard novel — pure *Boy's Own* stuff: intrepid white explorers, fierce orb of a sun, sweating bearers, wild country; natives to be presumed hostile until traded with or pacified. By the time we reached the river, John Shann, our cameraman from west London, had had a field day.

It is doubtful if the Junction had ever seen such a bandobast. At least, not since colonial days, when a group of brother officers would sometimes club together, set off from the army cantonment thirty miles away and trek down the valley of the tributary fishing and shooting as they went; to appear at the confluence with ponies, porters and servants, cases of whisky and port, thunderbox commodes, chests of drawers, and even the occasional wardrobe. What we may have lacked now in ready-assembled furniture was more than compensated for by a vast array of tents, food and equipment. And as for numbers of staff, we were surely in a class of our own with thirty. The porters were accommodated at the old pilgrim chatti in the upper village, bringing a new lease of life to the ancient building — and to the village itself; by winning the hearts of local maidens with their rugged good looks and tales of derring-do in the mountains. Across the tributary, on the beach beneath the ridge that lay a hundred and fifty yards back from the meeting waters, a small village of tents had been erected: our home for the next eight days.

I walked across the beach to the Junction and, with a calculating eye, watched the waters. The Ganges roared in from my right, in angry red-brown flood. The smaller tributary, at present an opaque greenish-grey in colour, approached from behind my right shoulder, pushed a yard or two into the tide and was at once devoured. To my left, the sun had slipped behind the flank of a high, conical hill that lay several hundred yards downriver on the far bank. At its foot, a sheer cliff stopped the near-two-hundred-yard-wide Ganges dead in its tracks and turned it a sharp ninety

degrees to the left, out of sight, behind a continuation of the ridge that lay above our camp. A straight five hundred yards or so of river from confluence to bend — this was the stretch for which I had promised so much to Linda and Peter months before. Now, I had to tell them there was a problem.

Despite the rapid runoff of the floodwaters which had swamped the camp two days earlier, the Ganges was still a good seven feet above fishable level. In its present condition the great river completely overwhelmed and discoloured the blue-green waters of the entering tributary; and as it was this clear water — running in a sixty-yard-wide band along the left bank of the Ganges below the confluence — that attracted the descending mahseer, invited them to stop, and encouraged them to feed; we had to wait until the main river fell. Only then would the waters of the tributary strike out into the Ganges for a sufficient distance to form the vital taking-strip. But, of course, this would take time. Four days, I now estimated; four days of hot, dry weather. If any rain fell in the meantime, the Ganges would hold its level, or rise. And there was another imponderable: my own special nightmare. What if, when the river did at last come right, there were no fish to catch? What if the run had already passed? Or was long since dead and gone, as Morris felt it might be?

I was contemplating the unthinkable when Peter joined me at the water's edge. I unburdened my worries. Peter, a product of a liberal education which had encouraged every sort of artistic and personal expression, heard me out and responded with maddening calmness. 'Then we wait four days,' was all he said, and ended the encounter with a Buddha's smile.

That night, when dinner and a few beers had worked upon the exhausted company enough to make it languish in a contented stupor, Peter broke the news. We were sitting in the lamplight of the mess tent, having moved there a little earlier from a table outside when dark clouds driven by a gusting south-easterly had threatened rain. I had scarcely eaten a bite since those first, fat raindrops puckered the sand. But they had faltered and passed, and moved off upriver, whence now came the bright spit of lightning and staccato crack of thunder. This distant accompaniment presently needled at my sense of well-being, later imposed itself upon my fading consciousness and, much later, intruded upon my sleep. The crew took the news well, however: 'Four days? No problem. We'll catch fish then, the film will be a wrap, and we'll all go home.' Peter did not mention the agreement we had made as we walked back to camp in the dusk; that, in the event of disaster, he and I would remain on the Ganges — he with a camera, me with a rod — for another month if necessary, until we got a fish.

* * *

The hurricane lamps were guttering smokily as I left camp before dawn. Chappé Ram the cook was already awake and rousing his Lahuli staff from their blankets, muttering instructions about lighting the stoves and washing up last night's dishes. I

had chosen a tent at the camp outskirts, next to theirs; I liked their company and valued the certainty of sharing with them their own early-morning tea before the rest of the party was awake. We would sit together in grinning silence, watching the breakfast porridge simmer, when I had returned from the river.

The Ganges had fallen by a foot during the night. A stick I had pushed into the pebbles at the water's edge and notched at river level with my knife had been left high and dry. Much heartened, I repositioned the stick in the shallows and returned to camp. After a cup of tea with Chappé and his men, I went over to the store tent to collect the gear.

Soon after arrival the previous afternoon, Peter had asked me to do a piece to camera about mahseer tackle. I had unshipped the modern successors to my old glass spinning rod from a plastic drainpipe rod carrier, withdrew four rods from their cotton bags and, together with John, inspected each of them. The bright sun flashed off the mirror-like surface of new varnish; I had only finished the rods a few days before departure. At the time, they had seemed like any other batch of rods; but, when I bemused my neighbours in a Welsh coastal village, as I bent each rod into a ridiculous hoop with a line attached to the nearby chapel gate, whilst standing at the doorstep of my cottage, this quickly changed. Alwyn the local postmaster, a salmon fisher himself, out on his morning constitutional along the cliffs, stopped, pointed at a rod and asked, 'What the devil is that for?'

'For those huge fish I used to catch in India, Alwyn,' I replied. 'They live in a river five times the size of the Towy and fight much harder than salmon.'

'Well, rather you than me, my boy!' he said, and walked on. By evening I had — at last — become an accepted, if not actually respected, member of the community.

In the four long, unlikely weeks since then, these rods — eleven feet in length, two and a half pounds in test-curve, of tubular graphite and kevlar construction — had ceased to be mere product, or even the tools of my trade; now they were every bit as exciting as the presents that once kept me from sleep in the dark, still hours before Christmas Day. I couldn't wait to try them.

John and I had filled the large, fixed-spool spinning reels with fresh line. The reel on my rod was loaded with 230 yards of 17lb-test; John's line, I noticed now, appeared to be thinner in diameter and was, therefore, probably weaker in breaking-strain. I would draw this to his attention; to use a line of much less than 18lb-test on the Ganges now would be to invite disaster. Terminal-tackle was refreshingly simple: a small 65lb-test swivel knotted to the end of the reel line; below this a thirty-inch nylon leader of similar strength, with a cross-locking, safety-pin-like snap-swivel at its point to allow quick attachment and removal of the lure. I formed the knots with care, moistening them with saliva before tightening, ensuring when I did that each turn bedded neatly against the next without strangling or distorting the nylon above the knot. A potential weak spot, such as a badly tied knot, has no place in fishing tackle — least of all in mahseer tackle. Finally, I clipped on an old lure, fixed its hooks securely into a wooden tent peg, walked back a few paces, and bent the rod

deeply into this immovable, surrogate monster, adjusting the reel's drag mechanism to give line only when the whole outfit was put under virtually tackle-breaking pressure. Too tight and the slipping clutch would not give line to the pull of a fast running fish. The result: straightened hooks or, more likely, a rifle-shot crack of the line. Too loose and the reel would give line much too freely at the sudden snatch of a take. The result: failure to set the hooks firmly in the fish's jaw. With these final preparations completed, I joined the rest of the party for tea and biscuits.

The eye of the camera was upon us as we waded into the smoking waters. Their power was irresistible; a great cushion of water erupted on the upstream side of our legs, threatening to push us over and sweep us away if we so much as dared to venture into water an inch or two above the knee. 'It's far too wild, Peter,' I shouted as I turned to the crew on shore. I watched George wince suddenly and grab at his headphones. I had forgotten the tiny radio-mike pinned to my shirt lapel. 'Sorry George,' I said in a whisper to the foam bud upon my chest. George, twenty yards away, smiled amiably and raised a thumb in acknowledgement. Peter gestured to us to fish on, sweeping an arm at the misty riverscape by way of explanation. We slung spoons into the toss of waves, and endeavoured to look keen and likely to hook a fish at any second, as the camera was hefted up and down the beach to capture the scene. When we waded ashore forty minutes later, Peter beamed us a wonderful smile.

'John has put film in the can that I can't even begin to describe,' he said. 'Really, all we need now is a fish or two and we're done.'

Linda came over and offered everyone a quiet 'Well done.' For a time we wallowed in a bath of self-congratulation; until the heat of the day began. The group retired to separate chairs in the thin shade of a canvas awning. Soon, attempts at humour withered, books went unread. By mid-morning the valley floor glowed like a furnace at white heat; an eye-squint world in which none of us could remember a time when anything was cool and grey. An all-consuming thirst now gripped the party. Beer began to flow. I asked Chappé to bring tea. This brought groans of displeasure from some. I urged them to drink it, for the staff's sake, and soon their thirsts were gone. Peter, John and I sat together, and tried to talk.

'I need hardly tell you,' I said, 'that we have another four days of this.'

'Is there a chance of a fish before then?' said Peter.

'Not here. In the tributary. Tomorrow. Lovely scenery.'

John sat in silence. A pained look clouded his remarkable, even features. I sensed he had begun to understand the enormity of our plight. He had depended upon me so much to find him mahseer, and now he found me floundering. Linda joined us and we turned in smiles towards her. She managed a wince in return. She knew. Clearly, Peter talked with her first, and us second.

After a few minutes of stilted conversation, I said, 'Let's go swimming. The whole crew. Cool us off. Come on!'

We did and it was marvellous.

Next morning we gave the Ganges a half-hearted fling with the rods before breakfast, then repaired to the whirlpool at the confluence. The crew had developed a liking for this alternative to five-star-hotel jacuzzis. As they bathed, I collected a light rod and a ball of atta paste from camp, and joined the village boys fishing for tiddlers a short way up the tributary. They fished with a stick and fixed line, and worm as bait. Soon we were catching infant mahseer, *jhebri* (small, silver and dace-like), and 'snow trout' — named for its spots, a member of the Baril family. I noted the boys' look of puzzlement, as they watched me return the few mahseer I caught whilst keeping the other fish for them to take home.

Surinder crouched beside me as I fished. He told me of a seventy-pound mahseer taken locally, in a net, during August. Since then, however, only a handful of fish had been taken, to nine pounds in weight. Even the poachers who bombed the tributary (we heard the muffled *crump* of their explosives each morning) were having a lean time. I wondered how many of that great fish's descendants remained in the river today. Would things ever go right for India, its people, and wildlife? Soon, I felt the old despair return.

A glance upriver at once dispelled the darkness. A group of young women from the village were washing pots and pans in the shallows, singing brightly and chattering as they worked. A few in their number, having finished their chores, were now washing themselves. They stood, naked above a cotton shift tied at the waist, straight-backed and fine-limbed, their skins glowing a warm brown in the hot sun. I turned away, but fishing now had lost its savour. I threw myself into the water and was borne by the current back to the bath towels and shaving-mirrors at the Junction.

* * *

We cowered beneath the shelter on the sands, recovering from the sorties we had made to the tributary yesterday afternoon and early this morning. An absence of fish and the pitiless sun had taken their toll. We were all-in.

From a heat-hazed corner of our terminal beach, four spectres appeared: three of them looking for all the world like First War infantrymen; followed by a fourth wraith, surely the mad monk Rasputin. Three policemen, two carrying vintage Lee Enfield .303 rifles, and a Hindu priest — tall, shaggily bearded and lightly toothed — had come to pay a social call. Chairs were found and duly offered. The sergeant sat down, gesturing to his constables to do the same. The priest chose to remain standing and spoke a few words to Freni in explanation. She translated: 'He says that he has not sat in a chair for fifteen years and is not going to now.' The priest stood and strap-hung from one of the awning-poles. The policemen informed us they were from a small town twenty miles up the Ganges valley, and had heard there were foreigners at the Junction. They had travelled by bus for twenty miles, then walked a further six to reach us. The priest, whom they had met on the pilgrim path, had

accompanied them merely out of curiosity. Having learned enough about us, they were making to leave when I got Freni to ask the sergeant if he knew of any leopard still living in these hills.

I had asked after leopard with good reason, for during the recce trip in May we had visited the small town of Rudraprayag. I had stood in the nearby village of Golabrai with a first-edition copy of Jim Corbett's book *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* open at a photograph he had taken from this spot on the morning of May 3rd 1926. Before me, fifty yards along the village street, was the site of the kill; a tree at the base of a hillside where, on the night of May 2nd sixty-three years before, Corbett had put a bullet into the most notorious man-eater that has ever lived. The animal had waged a campaign of terror in the district for eight years, killing 125 people during this period. Today, the denuded hills around Rudraprayag look hardly capable of sustaining a sparrow.

The police sergeant told us of a young couple, who lived in the town at the head of the dirt road which leads down to the Junction. They were in the front room of their home early one evening, when they heard the sound of splintering timber at the back of the two-roomed house. Getting up and going over to the house's middle door to seek a cause, they were confronted by the sight of the head and fore-quarters of a leopard appearing through the shattered back door. Their dog rushed past them into the rear room, barking and snarling at the emerging creature. The leopard was momentarily checked by the onslaught. Seizing this opportunity, the couple sprang back, shut the door, and made an immediate exit through the front of the house. The following morning the husband and a group of townsmen, armed with axes, guns and knives, approached and entered the building. The leopard had gone, leaving little trace of the brave dog that had dared to challenge it.

Freni finished telling the story. We smiled at one another indulgently.

'Freni,' I said. 'Ask him when this happened.' She did, and he told her.

'The day before yesterday,' she said. 'He swears it happened the day before yesterday.'

John Shann reached across to the table, picked up his glass of beer and drained it.

'Stuff this for a game of soldiers!' he said with vehemence. 'When I want leopards I go to Windsor Safari Park!' We laughed, but I am sure I was not the only one who kept a watchful eye as I slipped out to the toilet tent in the nights to come.

It was not for another two years, whilst travelling in another continent, that I heard more about the activities of leopard in the Garhwal Himalaya.

* * *

At nine o'clock on the morning of the fifth day, we sat in grisly silence around the breakfast table. The crew had trooped out of camp at seven, intent on capturing the action I had promised them days before. Neither John nor I had hooked a fish. I found myself in the company of people who considered themselves to have been

very patient, and now felt badly let down. Peter worked strenuously on the diplomatic front, explaining that wild creatures just cannot be expected to appear on cue, fish especially. The crew members, of course, knew this; but they had been under canvas for far too long. I took their discomfiture hard, though, for I had grown to like each one of them in the weeks we had been together.

I took a beaker of coffee with me over to the Junction. Twenty yards out, a ridge of water had formed where the Ganges struck the entering flow and was now deflected. The tributary was asserting itself. The sun appeared from behind a cloud and lit the valley. I stared hard at the river. After a minute I looked away, at the solid, unmoving forest, then turned back and stared some more. As I did this, I screwed my eyes up tight, opened them wide, then screwed them up again. Finally, I had to accept what they told me: that there was a band of lighter-coloured water, that the two-tone river had begun to flow. I sprang to my feet, returned hurriedly to camp, strode into the midst of the late breakfasters, announced, 'We will catch a fish this afternoon,' then spun on my heel and walked off.

Peter found me at the spring in the shade of the cliff behind the camp, playing sandcastles with the village boys. He joined us in our game of diverting the tiny rivulet through channels in the sand. Only after half an hour did he break the silence, to invite me for lunch with the others. I accepted and was readmitted to the fold.

At four-fifteen, John and I sat together on the boulder shore opposite Black Rock. Behind us, the crew cleaned camera gates and checked light-levels. I was reacquainting myself with some old favourites, plugs I had sealed away in a sandwich box almost a decade before. The water looked right for them now, so I had set aside spoons and was showing John these new items in our armoury. There was the Wood Vamp, the Hi-Lo and, ah yes, the Pikey Getum; all about four inches long and nearly an ounce in weight. Black-and-gold or brown-and-gold in colour, rigged with the size 4, extra-strong mahseer trebles still handmade by a small company in the British Midlands, these lures had covered themselves in glory many times. Made of wood or moulded plastic and fitted with a small, metal vane at the nose to make them dive and wriggle like a fish through water, they are irresistible to mahseer. John snapped on a Hi-Lo, and me a Getum; an old warrior scraped of half its paint by hooks fixed in the rubbery maw of mahseer in the past.

We got down to it. With a ten-yard wade and a fifty- to sixty-yard cast, our lures covered the line of current where the blue-green water met the grey. Beyond this, the Ganges ran in torn waves for another eighty yards towards the elongated slab of Black Rock, whose sloped shoulders now stood a full nine feet above the heaving river. The right bank lay a further sixty yards beyond. The plugs swung round the taking-strip time and again; we felt their distant throb as they worked the top three feet of the swift waters. I turned to John and we exchanged our first smiles in days.

Since ancient man first took a harpoon down to the water's edge, fishermen have claimed that rivers speak to them. I do not refer to river-noise; the watery babble,

chuckle and roar which play in accompaniment to our quiet self-absorption; but to those brief periods when water speaks in a language which can be comprehended by a part of the human brain that has all but ceased to function from long disuse. I am sure we can all remember days on the water when we could do no wrong. When each prospecting cast we made to every likely-looking holt was greeted by a taking fish. And how every cast on this singular day was a virtuoso performance, a textbook example of skills dimly imagined. On these all too infrequent days our confidence and sense of infallibility reach their zenith; for a while, there is something of the all-knowing sage about us. 'It was as if I was in a dream,' or 'It was just like magic,' we tell others. So powerful and enriching is this magic, we feel a terrible sense of loss when it has gone.

As I fished this afternoon, I began to sense that each cast I made was creating a certain resonance. I heard the commonplace sounds at first: the *whoosh* of the rod's power-stroke, the slap and flutter of the travelling line, the metallic clunk of the closing reel, the whirr of gears under load on a slow retrieve. And I began to sense it physically, too; through my legs initially, quivering from the exertion of standing upright in the flow, then in my head: a centre better equipped to register and interpret the finer sensations which followed. Without understanding how or why, I found myself entering that not uncommon trance-like state, in which whatever you may think or do appears to carry with it greater meaning. Ascetics starve themselves in caves to achieve this, meditators and yogis bend minds and bodies in its pursuit; anglers, in their innocence, need only stand beside water for this something to rise up from the depths and grab them. It had got me now.

The world of hours and minutes and words that ill convey our meaning suddenly dropped away; leaving me alone with the river. It hissed and roared in my ears. I turned to the others on the bank behind. John and Joe were crouched over their cameras, Peter chatted idly with Linda and Freni, Surinder sat with the tackle bags: they were unaware of the change. I continued to cast. The action had ceased to be a conscious one; it now ran silky smooth on automatic. I saw the golden track of the line extend and billow across the sunlit waters, watched the prettily painted piece of wood fall and touch their surface, and felt it at once snatched from me with an awesome power, causing the rod to buck punily in my hands. With each successive cast, the river's pull became more insistent; it drew me slowly, pace by pace, downstream. I could only follow in respectful silence.

I fished down to the head of the violent rapid below Black Rock. The noise in my head had now risen to a shriek. I redoubled my efforts, flinging the lure seventy yards out into the rip. I knew, with a conviction that transcended reason, that something was about to happen. It had to happen. If it didn't, I knew my body might make it back to camp for dinner tonight, but another part of me would still be out here, trying to conclude a one-sided dialogue with the river. The water became shallow and very broken. The plug shimmied across its surface in unconvincing fashion. I went to wind up and walk ashore. 'Fish it to the end,' I heard my voice

say. I did. And as the blood roared in my ears and my heart beat out a rapid tattoo, the river blew up before me.

The water parted, leaving a dark hole in a furrowed field of white. As the walls of the hole snapped together, inner and outer worlds again became one.

*'Yesss!'* I bellowed to the quivering air, *'Fishhh!'*

Mayhem broke out. Bailey splashed ashore, threw down his rod, and ran towards me. Shann started the camera. The rest surged to the water's edge. Whatever had struck at the lure now made no movement. If I had hooked the fish, then it was lying doggo; unusual behaviour for a mahseer which, when hooked, normally puts as much distance between itself and a would-be captor as it can. John stood beside me, almost beside himself with joy. I cut short his repeated volleys of congratulation.

'I don't know if it's still there, John.' I said. 'There was a bloody great splash, then nothing.' I ran through the shallows, to get below the line's point of anchorage out in the rapid. 'It may have transferred the plug to a stone.'

I pulled hard; the suspected piece of Asia moved off. 'Yes, that's a fish,' I said superfluously, as the reel shrieked and a mahseer ran hard upstream. I saw its marbled back and coppery flank cut through a plume of water thirty yards out, and judged the fish a good one. On seeing a mahseer for the first time, the watching crowd yelled and hooted from the shore.

It was a dour fight. Shallow, coloured water often deters mahseer from really cutting loose; poor visibility induces the fish to exercise caution, rather than set off at speed through a maze of hazardous rocks. The mahseer, nevertheless, fought more brightly than a good few salmon I had taken in the past.

Ten, maybe fifteen minutes later, the encounter was nearing a conclusion in the backwater off the main current at the far end of the beach. The fish wallowed heavily on the surface, yet still had sufficient strength to contest the full bend of the rod as I strove to lead it into Surinder's outstretched arms. Before us lay one of the 'grandmothers' — MacDonald's name for big mahseer — the fish of over twenty pounds which are invariably female. Behind me, I sensed the tension, heard expulsions of breath in wonder and astonishment, the speculative murmuring of villagers, Peter's whispered instructions to the crew. The mahseer slid across the water, lay alongside the bankside pebbles for a second or two, before Surinder cradled and carried her gently ashore. I heard cheers. I felt a thump between my shoulder blades. I put an arm around Surinder. John and I shook hands. Peter's eyes found mine across the mêlée. We tied the fish to a stringer, secured the end of the nylon cord to a large boulder on the bank, and returned the fish to the quiet waters for a period of rest. I walked up the beach, and waited for my shaking hands to still before repairing the tackle. Peter came over, and expressed a desire to fish. I invited him to take my spare rod, and delved into my bag to find him a plug.

'The spoon that's on there already will do,' he said. 'I just need to unwind. I'll go up to the rapids by the confluence.' He went off.

A few minutes later, as I was about to start again, I noticed a fishing line slice at a

shallow angle into the water in front of me. I required several seconds to account for its presence: a hundred yards upriver, Peter was not unwinding at all; his reel was.

I dropped everything and ran towards him, but had not covered more than a few yards when John's yell of 'Fish on!' came from downriver. I stopped and turned, and watched his rod first bend impressively then be dragged over near to the horizontal as a heavy fish went for broke. He gestured in the direction of Peter (who was a novice angler struggling with his first big fish), indicating that I go and assist him. I turned and ran.

Somehow, between the three of us, we managed to lose both of the fish. But we could live with their loss; for, whilst the earlier premonition of imminent success had been offered to me alone, not one of our party now was in any doubt that something of great significance had just happened.

Silent and unseen, the host had come.

* * *

The mahseer I had landed weighed twenty-six and a half pounds. At the dinner table that night, we drank a toast to the fish in Kingfisher beer.

'Now, what shall we call the film?' Peter said to the assembled company.

'How about *Dal M for Mahseer*?' said John Shann.

We laughed insanely, like condemned men who had won a reprieve. In the course of the evening, many more toasts were proposed and drunk.

As I crawled into my tent, much later, I could hear the porters still making merry in the village across the tributary. In the cook tent a few feet away, Chappé and his men giggled like schoolchildren. I slept well.

* * *

John fished the Black Rock Run first, next morning. Fifty yards upriver, I followed him down. Within minutes of our six-thirty start, John's plug was taken by a fish. A yell went up from the crew for me to come down and join him in front of the cameras as he played it. I fished out my present cast, but was taken violently as I commenced the retrieve.

'Er, George,' I said to the radio-mike. 'I have a fish on here and it appears to be a good one.' Fifty yards away, George slowly inclined his head, raised a hand in acknowledgement then turned to speak with Peter.

Meanwhile, the fish tore at least ninety yards of line from my reel on a breakneck run down and across the current, stopping in the middle of a ridiculous rapid just below Black Rock, a hundred and thirty yards away. In normal circumstances I would have given chase, but on this occasion there was an angler plus attendant crowd in my way. So I set the rod butt into my stomach, cupped my left hand over the reel spool and began to walk upriver, leading the fish after me, like a mastiff on

a leash. The line sung and the rod bowed and creaked, sickeningly; the pressure required just to move the creature was appalling. I had invested much faith in my tackle, but this fish was doing everything in its power to break it.

John's fish proved to be an ambitious toddler. As soon as it was ashore, the crew turned and came streaming up the beach in my direction.

'What d'ya call this then?' John Shann gasped at me on arrival. 'I call it a right KBS!'

'What's a KBS, John?' I said, already laughing.

'Kick-bollock-scramble — film talk, my son. You keep us sitting around doing sod-all for a week, and now you've got us running up and down this river like bleeding maniacs! That's a KBS.'

I reminded him — between grunts of exertion — I had told everyone that these fish had never seen a rulebook.

'Well just get this one out before John down there hooks another!'

I did, twenty minutes later. She weighed over thirty pounds. We took three more, from nine to fifteen pounds, before adjourning for breakfast.

That afternoon we were taught an old lesson: never to take good fortune for granted. By four-thirty the Ganges had risen, lost its attractive pewtery tinge, and begun to race in dirty whitecaps. A storm upriver, unsuspected and unseen, had caused this. We had, it appeared, been allowed only a brief window in the weather and less than a day in which to reap our harvest. Two days remained to us, and these seemed in jeopardy now. As I turned in that night, lightning played across the peaks to the north, and a cool, gusting wind tore at the flysheet.

* * *

Five-fifteen in the dawn half-light. Distant thunder. Light drizzle treading in cat's paws across the cloudy mirror of the backwater. A jeans-and-pullover morning. I collected a cup of tea and went back to bed.

John fished hard for nearly an hour, before setting off with Peter and Joe to trek to the summit of a hill across the river. From here, the priest had promised them, they could command no better view of the valley. I was breakfasting when they left. Joe carried the lighter, second camera.

Surinder appeared. He seemed surprised I wasn't fishing. I tried to explain that my time today would be better spent in camp, reading a book. He was having none of this, and became unusually insistent. I collected my tackle and followed him down the beach. At the river, I dug out a scarlet-bellied Shallowmac plug from the lure box. Surinder rocked his hand dismissively. 'Red, no good!' he said. (I remember Suban once saying the same, thirteen hundred miles away on the Kaveri.) I clipped on a sombre Getum. This earned a head-wobble of approval. Surinder, together with his young, deaf-mute friend from the village, settled down to watch me fish. At the end of half an hour, I waded ashore to take a pull from my water

canteen then, having slaked my thirst, made to return to camp. The deaf-mute boy cried plaintively, begging me to stay. He pointed to a three-foot-high cairn of stones he had built at the water's edge, and handed me a small, white stone, indicating that I place it on top. I gave him a kindly smile and did as he bade, setting the piece of spate-rounded quartz carefully upon the shaky summit. He smiled back, broadly, and made casts with an imaginary fishing rod into the river in front of the stones, making more of his sad, pathetic cries as he did so. I waded into the water.

It took only a couple of casts. On the third, the plug was taken by something which, for a moment, seemed to halt the flow. Thirty-five minutes later, we landed a beauty.

That mahseer was just a few ounces shy of forty pounds.

* * *

During the morning, the skies cleared from the south, the sun appeared and splashed the valley in diamond-light. The mountaineers returned, raving: Rasputin was right, the view was wonderful. John Shann, stirring, announced that despite being subjected to a right KBS on his morning off, he had filmed the taking of a forty-pound fish in the director's absence and, as a result, we would no longer be requiring Peter's services. 'I'm sorry, Peter,' he concluded, 'but we're going to have to let you go.'

I turned away. I felt so keenly for John Bailey, now. He had fished every bit as hard as me, and landed a number of mahseer too, but among them there had not been one of the larger fish. My run of seamless luck was becoming oppressive. I feared that it was about to cause resentment — not in John himself, but among the others. My fears proved to be groundless.

'Well, what will it be this afternoon, golden balls?' Shann said to me, by the river, later. 'A blue whale or a great white?'

'I don't think I'll fish, John. I'm tired. I need a break.'

'Oh yeah. Don't knock Lady Luck, son. When she wants you, go with her. She'll drop you soon enough. You're going to fish!'

I fished.

I went up to the broken water at the head of the run, leaving the area around Black Rock well alone: for John. The Ganges had dropped and cleared slightly; the tributary had lost its milky turquoise cast and now ran with a startling clarity, in pure aquamarine. We fished for more than an hour without incident. When I drew level with the cairn on the bank, I came in. There, I towelled the sweat from my eyes, put the best part of a litre of water away and stood chatting with John Shann, whose camera stood a few feet from the pile. A pied wagtail, that jaunty little bird I have seen everywhere from Delhi to Datchet on Thames, busied itself along the water margin. The sun dipped behind the hill downriver, leaving the valley floor in shadow and its waters strangely flat and lifeless. I went over to them now. The

*Relief! Just a few ounces shy of 40lb*

wagtail, unconcerned, bounced away along the pebbles a few feet. In the shallows I quickly found what I was looking for, and picked it up.

'What's that in aid of?' John said.

'You'll see.'

I placed the thumbnail-sized ball of crystal upon the cairn as I got into the river.

On a whim, I changed the Getum for a Wood Vamp. The Vamp, light and very buoyant, fishes shallow with an accentuated wallowing action. I felt the difference at once, through the pull on the rod; frenziedly, the plug was working in water of a ferocity never envisaged by its American craftsman-designer back in the early years of this century. The lure, I realized, hadn't a snowball in hell's chance in this current, and I went to wind up.

The slaty chop fractured into a freeze-frame image of white and gold. Spray flew. You could have heard the splash a furlong away. I lost all control of the tackle, perhaps the most exhilarating, scary sensation an angler can feel, as a fish set off downriver. 'Yes, *yess, yesss!*' I cried, in inadequate response to its humiliating power. Line poured from the reel in a continuous shriek. Ninety yards were gone before the clutch slowed, choked, then proceeded to deliver line in erratic spurts as the fish, realizing its tormentor was not to be shaken off in one frantic rush, stopped, circled to face the current and consider its next move. I understood the truth of what Morris had told me that first afternoon, years before; about being left, feeling like a bloody

fool upon the riverbank. Today, here I was, an idiot left standing in the water.

I was dimly aware of the clack of pebbles and splash of water as I ran down the beach. I drew level with the mahseer, which now lay in midstream, wound down tight and felt its weight. A ponderous, immovable weight. The fish replied by whipping the rod round and running again. The reel spool jagged alarmingly against a drag pressure I had set when it was full of line. My fingers scrambled for the drag control and eased the tension, narrowly averting the imminent smash. With very nearly two hundred yards of line gone from the reel, the fish stopped. I ran again. A hundred yards away across the current, holed up now in some cosy parlour amidst the rapids, the fish twisted and rolled from side to side. This activity, which I had termed 'sandbagging' ten years before, transmits a series of violent jerks along the line, causing the rod-tip to be snatched over repeatedly. Awesome and intimidating, these great thumps are enough to make an inexperienced angler reach for his knife and cut the line. I knew I had to take the battle to the fish now, or it would stay out there all night, pectoral fins spread wide, holding position in the boil. I began to walk.

Twenty-five minutes later, both mahseer and man were tiring. The fish had grown during the course of the fight: from twenty-five ('no point in under-exaggerating a nice fish'); to thirty ('it certainly can't be less'); to forty pounds ('just look at the width of the back'). I had played the fish hard, far harder than I would a salmon. The hook-hold offered by a mahseer's mouth allows this, whilst the nature of the fish and the water in which it swims absolutely demand it. Play a big mahseer as you would a salmon and there can be only one of two outcomes: the near-certainty of losing that fish, or, less likely, landing it after more than two hours of battle — a hollow victory for the angler and an abuse of a fine creature. I watched the golden flank and bronze-green lateral stripe, close yet tantalizingly out of reach, for another ten minutes. She came in a dozen times, but on each occasion found the strength to regain the current. After one final tail-thrashing surge across the shallows to avoid Surinder's hands, she came ashore. Well over forty pounds, I said, but would not commit myself further until she was on the scales. In the meantime, I went across to John Shann.

'Have you finished now?' he said.

I nodded, then slowly shook my head in disbelief. John began to chuckle. A few seconds later, I did too. Then we laughed together until it hurt.

* * *

That night, when I had tired of the celebrations, I found myself a patch of sand a minute's walk from camp, and sat down. A clump of aromatic *lantana* bushes screened me from the lamplight and the sound of my friends making free with the last of the whisky. It had been a memorable day. The fish had rattled the dial needle round to fifty-two pounds. I believed it to be the heaviest rod-caught mahseer taken

from the Ganges in more than ten years, the biggest since Ivan's and Morris's seventy-pounders. I had been blessed with forty- and fifty-pound fish in one day. I lay back upon the soft cool sand in weary exaltation.

Across the river, a dark heave of hills rose into a blue-black sky. Far above them, in the spangled banner of the heavens, drifted a white path. Never before had I seen this mist of stars float and shimmer with such a clear intensity; they looked so close now that you could reach up and run your hand through them. Perhaps the effects of the drink and the events of the day were at last getting to me, for I began to laugh aloud at the sudden realization that my Penguin book of Hindu myths had been absolutely right. Beside me, the Ganges ran through the cricket-chirp stillness of an earthly night, while above, in a broad swathe across the inky firmament, flowed a celestial river: *Ganga* the goddess, whom the gods persuaded with infinite solicitude to fall from the heavens and shed her purifying waters upon a sinful earth. Today, we know this star-stream as the Milky Way.

I lay there, grinning at the wheeling galaxies, watching the gentle play of their light, marvelling at the splendour. They flooded me with a sense of peace and infinite well-being. For the first time in years, the chatter inside my head fell silent; the multitude of well-rehearsed words dropped away. And, in this state of wordless knowing, I was aware that I had found a region *in* this world, but not *of* it; a meeting place of mind and body, earth and sky, where life's daily trivialities are recognized for the distractions that they are; where everything I had done in the past, or anything that I might do in the future, was of little consequence. Only the present mattered now, this strange, shimmering present upon a beach beside a river among the stars. From this moment, there could be only present in my life: no more past regrets or futile attempts to undo damage I had done, no more desperately hoped-for futures; just a constant, living present.

The waking dream ended. I was on the sand, alone but for a questing spider. I shook with cold. I got up and went in search of coffee and sleep.

Perhaps it was the caffeine that kept me awake, I do not know, but from the moment I laid my head on the pillow, my mind began to race. I followed it on a journey through a wild, yet often familiar landscape for the rest of the night. In those long hours I reviewed my five-year career as a businessman, my present life and the likelihood in the future of my doing any of the things I once dreamed about; like keeping an appointment I had made, with a fish in Central Africa, a decade before; or giving myself the time and space to see, once and for all, if I could write — a life-long fantasy. I will spare you laboured self-analysis; but for the sake of your understanding — just why I did what I did next — I must elaborate a little.

By dawn a number of things had become clear to me. I considered them as I sat before the tent flap, watching the river take up the cyclamen and rose-pink colours of the new day. I knew, above all else, that the river was the key. (Man has probably likened his life to a river's course ever since a time when language first enabled him to articulate his abstract musings to fellow members of the tribe. And, though since

hackneyed by over-use, the metaphor is an apt and extremely accurate one.) For years this river, the Ganges, had held me in its thrall: at times initiating leaps in the imagination for which I could not account; at others, inspiring ecstatic swings of mood in the way that only a dearly regarded lover can. But I had ignored the river of late, and failed to heed the lesson she once taught. I had heard her strange warnings in recent days. Now, I was ready to listen.

During the night, I followed the Ganges from its uncertain beginnings in an ice cave among the peaks, sprinting with the river in the wild days of youth, absorbing such streams and rivulets that took its fancy, growing all the while in size, confidence and power, before sweeping out of the last mountain gorge in imperious fashion, only to have its waters halted and drawn off by man's steel-and-concrete barrage on the plains. Next, I loafed down canals, swimming with the happy children, before losing myself in a thousand thirsty rice-fields. Leagues away, in the river's former course, I trotted with a thin and fretful stream across gravel shoals. Wherever we journeyed, we were dammed and diverted, quaffed and consumed, without heed for our wishes. Then, there came a time when we no longer knew who we were, or where we were going. Nor could the people on the banks say now whether this was the Ganges, or just a minor tributary. I travelled with the river far that night, but left her as she limped into the many-channelled delta, towards those last uncertain miles before the sea. I had learned enough.

I accepted now what I had known for years: that my life was blocked and that change was the only remedy. I felt light-headed at the prospect.

I had a perfect last day on the river; chatting and joking with the crew, spending valuable time with Surinder, and helping Dinesh and Peter to land fish of twenty-seven and a half and forty-two pounds; before staggering off to bed, speechless from exhaustion, shortly after nine o'clock. Tomorrow, at dawn, we would strike camp and leave for the road.

* * *

Peter and I walked off the beach together, after many touching farewells and completely inadequate expressions of thanks to the villagers. The valley lay silent, in shadow, disturbed only by the occasional rattle of branches as a family of langur went about its early business before man appeared. We halted on the dirt road, at the bend where, twice before, I had turned and taken leave of the Junction. We arrived in uneasy silence. It was several minutes before Peter spoke.

'This has been the best month of my life, Paul. I have to thank you ...'

I quickly extended a hand, more to offer him my own thanks than to spare him further embarrassment. We grinned at one another, desperately.

'What next, Paul? What will you do after this? I'll be locked away for months, editing. But you — can selling fishing rods ever be the same?'

'No, it won't. India changes people — you know that. I think that's why I agreed

to make the film. I knew coming back here would stir things up.'

He nodded, but said no more. We took a last look at the confluence.

'I am thinking of going to Africa, Peter,' I said, a few minutes later. 'In search of a great fish I should have had a shot at years ago.'

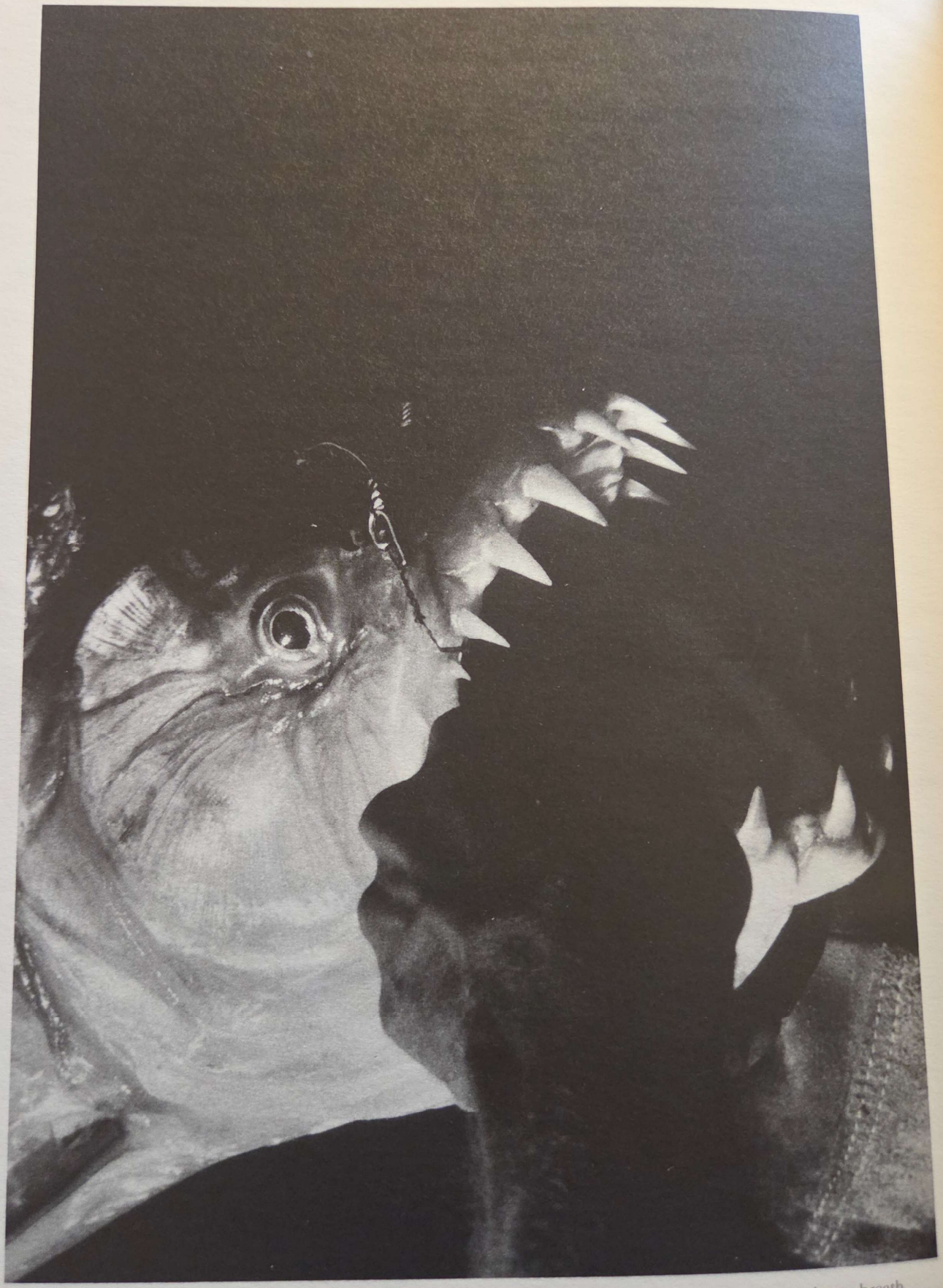
Then I spoke to him of mermaids and many-headed monsters and, when I had finished, I saw the clear, unblinking look of wonder in his eyes. Like me, he could feel the terrible lure of the beast, Goliath. His look was enough.

* * *

Ten days later, I made a discreet telephone call from my much beleaguered workshop in West Wales to another business premises in Swindon, Wiltshire.

'Jeremy, I am going after goliath next year,' I said. 'Coming along?'

'Ow! You are twisting my arm. Stop it!' he said in a hushed yell. 'All right then. Yes. I would like to, very much. But don't think for a minute it is going to be easy.'



He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath — 'The horror! The horror!'

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

**Chapter Eleven**

# The Horror

Jeremy Wade

VEN. Now, *Piscator*, where will you begin to fish?
PISC. We are not yet come to a likely place, I must walk a mile further yet, before I begin.

Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler* (1653)

Imagine: somewhere the other side of the fragile half-silvered mirror between what is known and what is unknown, something stirs. The mind's eye shifts its focus and, in the instant before it recoils, catches a sharp glint in the black space beyond. Later, the blurred memory-trace held in trembling freeze-frame reveals a diabolic mechanism of interlocking blades set in a streamlined bulk of metallic flesh — a horror-fantasy vision of a machine come hideously alive.

But this horror is no fantasy. A monstrous relative of the piranha, *Hydrocynus goliath* ('giant water dog') is without doubt the most horrifying freshwater fish in the world. Its multi-hinged muzzle is clamped shut by a pair of muscles each the size of a man's bicep: the force behind each point of the eighteen dagger-like teeth is almost incalculable. Whatever unconscious nostalgia we may feel for our prehuman life in the water — in many ways an element more benign than the harsh air — one look at this apparatus makes us grateful that our ancestors got out when they did.

... and for most of us, mercifully, this is as close as the goliath tigerfish gets: the shadow of an echo in the mind's hinterland. The great river where it lives in reality is sealed off from the rest of the world, its mouth guarded by throat-teeth cut from rock, its many tails buried into the world's second largest rainforest.

The river's existence was not even suspected by outsiders until 1482, when the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão came across two spits of land, fifteen miles apart, pushing from the Atlantic shore of Africa six degrees south of the equator. Battling into the estuary on an onshore breeze, he encountered a flow more powerful than anything experienced by a white man before. The people on its banks told him it was *nzadi*, 'the river that swallows all rivers'. When Cão attempted to pronounce this, the word he said was 'Zaire'. The people belonged to a kingdom called Kongo.

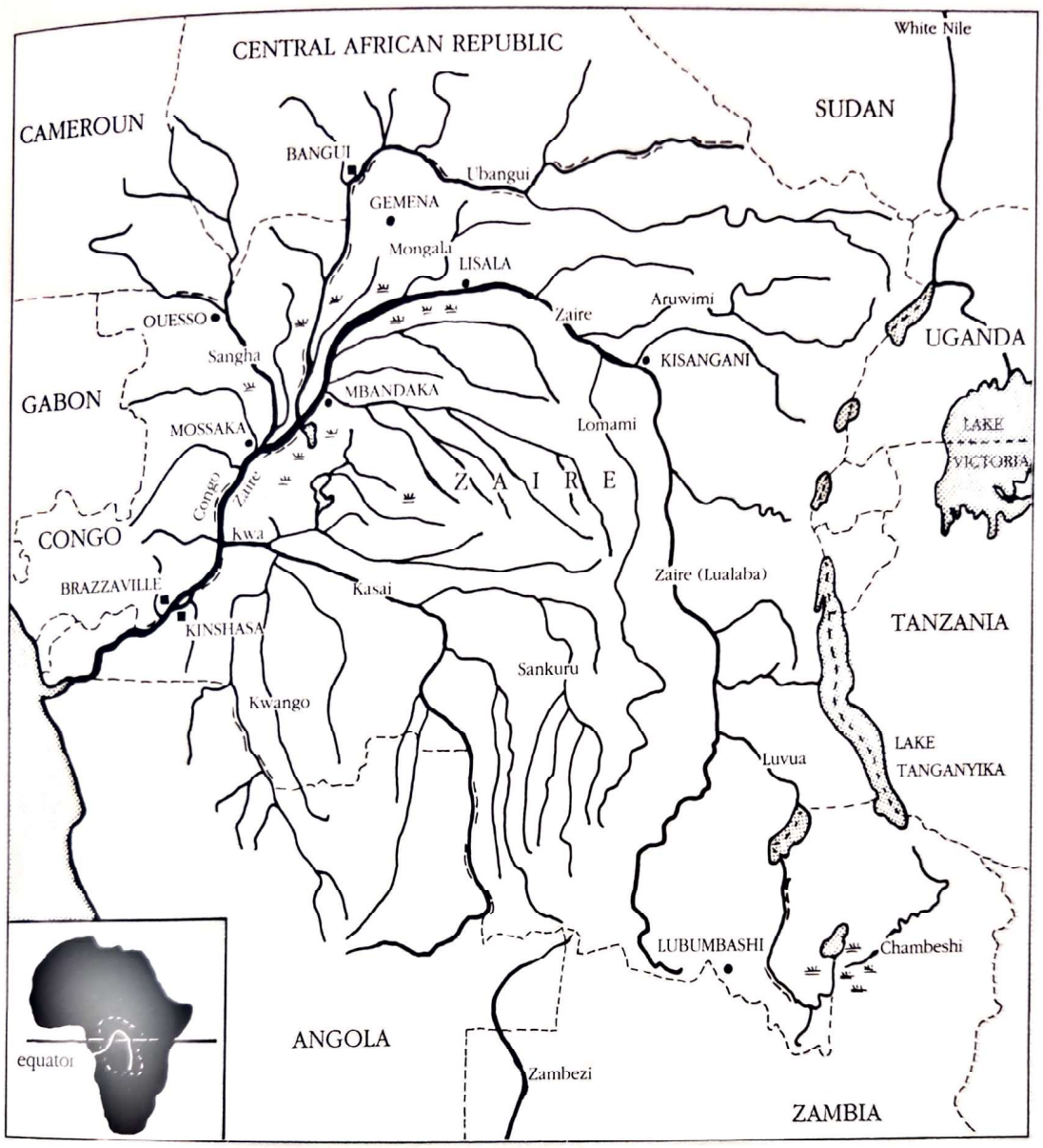
Three years later, having reported back to Portugal, Cão returned to follow the river inland. The prize was an end to the trade stranglehold of the North African Arabs, whose caravans brought gold and ivory from the southern fringe of the

Sahara to the bazaars of the Mediterranean shore. Some also hazarded that here, at last, was the way to the priest-king Prester John, said to rule a fabulous Christian empire somewhere beyond the encircling crescent of Islam. Others went in dread of man-eating monsters, such as the one written about by Pliny in the first century, that kills with a sting from its tail then devours its victims with a triple row of teeth. (A curious echo of this persists in the legend of *mokele-mbembe*, a Loch-Ness-Monster-type creature, possibly a sauropod dinosaur, that is believed by some cryptozoologists still to inhabit the Central African swamps.)

Cão's expedition discovered nothing. A hundred miles into the interior it was halted by the churning 'Cauldron of Hell', beyond which thundered what we now know to be but the final plunge of a stairway of cataracts and rapids that extends for over two hundred miles. The navigable water of the middle river lay nearly a thousand feet above. Just seven years later, in 1492, Columbus was to land in what became known as the New World; but these defences, together with the jungle (and Europe's sudden preoccupation with slavery, an activity that required going little further than the coast), were to keep the river's secret *for a further four centuries.*

Even then, in 1877, the denouement was an accident. The man who eventually circumvented the cataracts did so from the opposite direction and had been engaged in an entirely different quest. Having set out from the continent's Indian Ocean shore 999 days before, the journalist-turned-explorer Henry Morton Stanley had been following a river that Dr David Livingstone had believed to be the upper Nile. This river, known locally as the Lualaba, ran due north up the centre of the continent on purposeful collision course with the Mediterranean. Livingstone had been exploring the area around its headwaters when he had died; but nobody, not even the otherwise ubiquitous Arab slavers of the east coast, had ever followed it downstream. Cannibal tribes, fatal diseases and murderous water were all predicted in the dark jungle into which it suddenly plunged. Stanley's small army was duly decimated by all three, in what became one of the greatest exploration epics of all time. Meanwhile the river changed course, veering west, then south-west — describing a giant anticlockwise arc — by which time its altitude (determined by measuring the boiling point of water) was such that it could not possibly be the Nile; it could only be the Congo.

The waterway down which Stanley voyaged is now variously said to be between fifth and ninth longest in the world. Disagreement arises over the status of side-branches that happen to extend further than their trunks. In the case of the Congo, some measure from the source not of the Lualaba but of the elusive Chambeshi, which winds its way via swamp and lake from near the southern tip of Lake Tanganyika. This stretches the river's length by 200 miles to 2,900 miles. But even this figure understates the river's significance. The Congo is but the central vessel of an enormous system that drains a million and a half square miles. Its aggregate flow — ten million gallons per second — is surpassed only by the Amazon. A submarine canyon at its mouth cuts a hundred miles into the ocean. This vastness, and its




*The Amazonia of Africa. The Zaire (Congo) River drains an area the size of the whole of India*

remoteness, makes it the perfect setting for a monster.

Our discovery of that monster, like everything connected with this region, it seems, was pure chance. Paul was passing through the pages of a long-out-of-print compendium entitled *Game Fish of the World* (published just one year after MacDonald and acquired as part of background research into mahseer) when the fish sprang its ambush. It was waiting in a brief chapter translated from the notes of a Dr Henry Gillet, a medical inspector who had lived for nearly forty years in what was then the Belgian Congo.

Gillet's words provoke, then confirm, our worst fears. Like those of the Ramganga valley, this tiger has a taste for human flesh. Just bathing in the river carries the risk,

we are told, of the sudden loss of genitals. The doctor himself witnessed wounds where pieces of arm or leg had been cut off. One victim had merely been washing his hands over the side of his canoe. All four fingers of his left hand had been completely severed.

Not even crocodiles are safe; nor that other large predator of these waters, the bucket-mouthed *Lates niloticus* — the Nile perch. Cannibalism is routine. Gillet reports an occasion when he was about to land a 'small' goliath of about twenty-five pounds, when it was seized and 'carried irresistibly away' by one of its relatives. After an unstoppable fifty-yard run the line fell slack. The original fish was retrieved minus a semicircular mouthful that would have weighed about six pounds, cut from the body as if by an outsize pastry cutter.

Faced with such routine excesses, sensible creatures either got out or became extinct. Those that were left got tooled up. Biological weapons and defence systems that have evolved in the course of this underwater arms race range from barbed spines and electricity to armour-plating, poisonous flesh and bodies that inflate. Another way to secure a quiet life is to grow to immense size. I have spoken with a man who claims to have seen a *Heterobranchus* catfish, killed by dynamite, of over six hundred pounds. To reach the top in such a neighbourhood, as goliath has succeeded in doing, you have to abandon all niceties.

The result, from the angler's point of view, is an opponent without parallel in all the world's freshwaters. But capturing it was to prove more difficult than even the most confirmed pessimist could have predicted.

The problem (at first sight) doesn't lie in fishing methods, which cover the spectrum one would expect for a confirmed predator. Trolling and casting spoons, plugs and deadbait, static fishing with live and dead fish — all provoke a decidedly unsubtle response from a feeding goliath ... if you can reach him. For this is a river with no banks, just a wall of jungle or swamp. It is necessary to venture onto the limitless, crocodile- and hippo-infested waters inside a hollowed-out tree. These, the doctor drily observes, have only 'relative stability'. And he rules out venturing beyond what's accessible from European settlements. Even for a long-established resident, most of the water is off-limits.

On top of this, how do you identify holding areas on a moving inland sea? (The main river, we later learnt from a reliable source, having seen various improbable figures in print, is up to nine miles wide; and some of the big tributaries go to over half this.) Gillet gives a partial answer. Certain features — drop-offs, underwater obstacles, confluences — tend to attract goliath (though trolling ostensibly featureless water is also occasionally productive). But when it comes to the broader perspective, he admits defeat. The fish — and particularly the big ones — are inexplicably localized. Some stretches hold them, others don't. And just as you think you are starting to see a pattern, something confounds you. Gillet's largest fish (of which more later) came from a place called Tshikapa, on the River Kasai, a locality he had previously considered a dead loss.

But it's when the story turns to landing the fish that it takes on its most apocryphal tone. Goliath is depicted as a supernatural escapologist. Its interlocking teeth form a wall of bone into which no point can penetrate. Then, on being struck, it accelerates to escape-velocity and becomes airborne, all the while contorting its dextrous jaws. Fourteen fish out of fifteen hurl the hooks free in this way. And it can be worse. In one session, fishing plug, Gillet describes having fifty strikes, from either goliath or its smaller cousin *Hydrocynus forskahlii* (the common tigerfish, found throughout sub-Saharan Africa), of which he 'hooked' twenty-two — and landed not a single one.

We get the feeling, however, that frustration is tinged with secret relief (like when a deadbait trundles to the bottom of a Kaveri rapid unscathed). On the rare occasions when the hooks do hold, mayhem breaks out in the unsteady dug-out as fish take off on hundred-yard runs, arm-wrenching power-dives and gravity-defying aerobatics. Piano wire leaders are snarled into spirals, lures disfigured beyond recognition and hooks completely redesigned. Sometimes rods are broken.

If angler and tackle survive, the fish then has to be brought into the narrow, slippery confines of the boat. Gillet's method was to hoist the fish inboard with a strong gaff. After this came 'a skilful thrust with a spear at the spot where the head joins the body.' Apparently this is 'the only satisfactory way to terminate the battle.' Can this be serious? Leander J. McCormick, translator of Gillet's notes from their original French and himself the captor of some of the world's most renowned sporting fish (including good-sized *forskahlii* from East Africa), was in no doubt. He declared in the light of Gillet's account: 'It is my firm opinion that a large Goliath is by all odds the most difficult fresh water fish to hook and land.'

Which brings us to the final factor that makes goliath such a formidable foe. The record at the time this account was published, caught by Gillet, weighed eighty-seven and a half pounds. Its length was just over fifty-three inches. Yet the existence at that time of individuals weighing well over a hundred pounds is in little doubt. Gillet was once brought the decomposing remains of a jaw (a very good indicator of overall size) that had been found in a dried-up depression following the ebb of the wet-season floods, the rest of the corpse having been eaten by scavengers. He simply says that it had belonged to 'an enormous fish', much bigger than his record.

He also had a brief encounter with a living giant. This fish he clearly saw twenty yards in front of him as it jumped to throw the hook. Its length, he states, was certainly six feet (just picture it: standing on its tail it would meet you eye to eye). As for its weight, he estimated at least double that of his near-ninety-pounder*. I shut my eyes and try to summon it, the vision that must have haunted Gillet for the rest of his life. That tantalizing glimpse and a few scattered relics remain the sum of our knowledge.

* Calculation confirms this estimate: a fish measuring 6ft could have comfortably topped 200lb. The length multiplication factor from 53in to 72in is x1.36. Assuming the lost fish had the same proportions as the 87½-pounder, the multiplication factor for volume, and hence weight, is $x(1.36)^3$, ie x2.52. This would give a figure for the lost fish of 220lb (or, put a slightly different way, nearly 16 stone).

The hook was set. But our hopes of an extensive (if dusty) literature on the fish waiting to be discovered, similar to the situation with the mahseer, were quickly dashed. Gillet's was the only first-hand angler's account. There was nothing before, nothing contemporary — and nothing since. We would have to get our answers indirectly: by collecting as many peripheral details as we could — geographical, historical, travellers' tales — then launching into some educated guesswork. By joining the pieces of the puzzle that we could find, we hoped to learn the shape of what was missing.

We turned to texts on African fishes: there were brief mentions, no more. *H. goliath* is found only in the warmer, lower-lying waters of the Congo system, they said (although there was one vague reference to Lake Tanganyika).

We looked at the map of Africa. The river, draining an area the size of the whole of India, insinuates its outer extremities into many nations: the Central African Republic, Cameroun, the People's Republic of the Congo, Angola, Zambia. The Belgian Congo no longer exists. The heart of the system now lies inscrutably behind the borders of a single massive nation the size of Western Europe: Zaire.

So we started looking for information — any information — on Zaire. What we found did not make cheerful reading. The history of this territory, it quickly became clear, lies under a dark shadow. Hidden from the eyes of the world, it has been the scene of a succession of quite unimaginable horrors — horrors that remain to this day a blank on our collective mental map. And it is a blank that is strenuously maintained, for our prosperity is for a large part a consequence of those horrors.

The process started just a decade after Cão sailed into the great river's mouth, with the landing by Columbus in the 'New World'. The fertile Americas needed only a labour force to turn them into money-spinners. Europe's interest in Africa came to focus on just one commodity: slaves. Perhaps ten million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century alone. Much of the activity centred on the mouth of the great river. The coastal kingdom of Kongo, after a brief period of genuine friendship with Portugal, was destroyed. It was not until the nineteenth century that the cumulative effects of industrialization, American independence and growing moral outrage brought this particular horror to an end.

But the new mood of enlightenment, which also gave the impetus to the great African explorers — Mungo Park, Burton, Livingstone, Stanley — had an unintended consequence. Stanley had a vision (highly naive in retrospect) of mutually beneficial development of the region, based on the construction of a road, and later a railway, through the mountains alongside the cataracts. Trading posts would be established on the waters above, linked by a fleet of boats. He hawked this ambitious project around to the governments of several countries, including Britain, but could find no backers. The interior of Africa at that time was rather like a plate of sticky sweets at a children's party that everybody is too polite reach for. But everybody was watching everyone else. As long as nobody did anything, everybody was happy. It was an uneasy balance of indifference.

The move came from an unexpected direction. Leopold II of Belgium, acting solely in his capacity as patron of an allegedly philanthropic organization, expressed an interest. After at first refusing to respond, Stanley accepted Leopold's contract to build the road, negotiating the right of way with local chiefs. Sensing that something was afoot, the major powers convened a conference at Berlin in 1885 at which they found themselves recognizing Leopold as sovereign of the 'Congo Free State'. This comprised the entire central area of the basin, excepting only that part to the west and south-west of the Ubangui, which was claimed by France (whose emissary, of whom more later, had recently stumbled upon a 'side door' to the river: up one of the rivers of present-day Gabon, and thence overland to the head of the rapids). But Leopold's humanitarian motives had been a front. The territory — nearly a million square miles — was to be run as his private estate. The 'Scramble for Africa' had begun.

Leopold had a knack for wealth creation. With the 1888 invention of the pneumatic tyre, rubber became his main chance. Workers failing to reach their quotas had their hands cut off. More than five million are thought to have been killed. This is the period of which Joseph Conrad wrote in his chilling novel *Heart of Darkness*, an apocalyptic vision of the evils that inevitably tread in the footsteps of absolute power. Precisely what horror was seen on his deathbed by Mr Kurtz (the lines on page 154), Conrad's company agent at the 'Inner Station' — modern Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville — we can only guess. The outside world took twenty years to stop denying the atrocities (documented by, notably, the then British Consul Roger Casement — later to turn his attention to Irish home rule, a cause that led to his execution by the British for treason). Eventually, after much debate, during which nobody considered returning the land to its previous rulers, an embarrassed and reluctant Belgian government took control in 1908. The territory was now the Belgian Congo.

Much about the new regime — education, health, transport — was genuinely progressive. But the new administrators were unwittingly assembling a time-bomb. On the evidence of all other African colonies, independence was inevitable, but Belgium refused to acknowledge this until it was too late. Their subjects were given no preparation for self-government, being excluded from even minor positions of responsibility. Then, when independence was finally conceded in 1960, the country was given almost no notice.

The result was chaos. Within days the army mutinied against their Belgian officers (who had been reluctantly retained), triggering widespread strikes and rioting. Copper-rich Katanga province, in the south-east, took this as its cue to declare itself a separate state (given a nod and a wink from outside). The central government sent an SOS to the United Nations. Katanga recruited white mercenaries. The new country sank into bloody civil war.

Barely had this uprising been put down when, in 1963, the *Simbas* burst from the rainforest of the north-east and overran more than half the country, sweeping the

army before them. Once again mercenaries took the stage, this time on the government side. The rebels were pushed back up the river to Stanleyville, where they took all the city's expatriates hostage. The outside world sat up, Belgian paratroops dropped from US planes, and the mercenaries went in to mop up. Reports tell of unspeakable carnage.

Since then, the uneasy peace has been broken by two invasions from across the Angola border in the south, the most recent in 1978. Again the country's geographical integrity, for what it's worth, has survived. But the cost mounts: nearly a quarter of a million people have been killed in conflict since independence. Now the lid is forcibly clamped down by the man who took power in a coup in 1965, the US-backed President Mobutu Sese Seko; but the ingredients are still there for a lethally explosive mixture.

To be concerned about the fate of a mere fish, in the face of all this human misery, suddenly seemed trivial in the extreme. In fact, the fish seemed about the only cause for optimism. Protected by the sheer vastness of the river and the uninhabitable nature of most of the land (the population of Zaire is just half that of the UK), the chances were that it had survived the human upheaval unscathed. And with the cataracts preventing entry from the ocean, there would not be the situation, as on the Amazon, of commercial fishing boats cleaning up fish stocks hundreds of miles inland. That goliath was holed up in a few last outposts, like the mahseer, was unlikely.

Yet, despite this, the more we learned about present-day Zaire (both country and river were rechristened as part of Mobutu's 'Africanization' campaign), the further the fish receded. The country is broke, bled by the government and felled by the collapse of commodity prices. With the state unable to pay even its own employees (so the story goes) everything runs on bribes. Meanwhile the jungle silently swallows the works of man — particularly, in the few corners where they once existed, roads. It's estimated that eighty-five per cent of those that existed at independence have disappeared. Compared to the extensive transport network in India, in Zaire there's nothing. The waters of the Zaire are even more inaccessible today than they were in Gillet's time.

But at least Zaire issued a visa to UK passport holders that allowed a lengthy stay. (This was not the case for the Central African Republic and the People's Republic of the Congo, both former French colonies, two options we briefly considered.) And apparently there was still the occasional riverboat operating out of the capital, Kinshasa, and trucks running on some of the roads....

But where in all its vastness to head for? Given the likely health of the fish population, this would be determined by considerations of logistics and red tape. Unfortunately the obvious choice, Gillet's old stamping ground on the southern fringe, had to be ruled out. This is the region that holds the country's mineral reserves (the uranium for the first atomic bomb came from here) and which has provided the spark for most of the fighting. A foreigner unconnected with the mining

interests would arouse all sorts of suspicion if found creeping around here. This is also the one area where fish stocks might have suffered, owing to the likely availability of dynamite.

In casting our net wider, however, we ran into another problem. Fishing for goliath is only worthwhile in low water, a limited period of a few months. When the river is in flood you might as well not bother: the fish disperse into vast, turbid swamps, where they are, by all accounts, uncatchable. When was the right time for each region?

At first, the picture appeared simple. When it's dry to the north of the equator, it's the rainy season in the south. And vice versa. (There's also a degree of east-west variation, but not so dramatic.) But superimpose onto this a flowing waterway that crosses the equator twice and is joined by tributaries from both north and south, and the picture gets inordinately complicated. For no rain does not necessarily mean low water. River levels are affected by what's happening hundreds of miles upstream. (And one part of the river, I was later to learn, is even affected by what's happening *down*stream.) The month-by-month level of the Zaire was anybody's guess.

It was while we were scratching our heads over this puzzle that fate took a hand. During the course of a fishing conversation, Paul was shown a photograph. By an incredible coincidence (incredible because nobody knew of our intentions) it was a recent picture of a big goliath, of 35.7 kilos (just short of eighty pounds), caught by a Frenchman (from a region inaccessible to British nationals). This was just the shot in the arm we needed: solid confirmation that the fish really did still exist. The details of its capture also provided a vital piece of the water-level jigsaw. That moment the countdown proper began.

Up until then, it is perhaps true to say that the lack of hard information had been almost comforting. It had provided an excuse for endlessly putting off an endeavour that was looking more and more daunting the more closely we looked at it. We had both indulged in what psychologists would probably have labelled 'displacement activities': exploits whose underlying purpose was probably, in part, to prevent us from facing up to what was really on our minds. Paul made three trips to the Arctic Circle after Icelandic Salmon. I went looking for *Pangasianodon gigas*, the gigantic vegetarian catfish of the Mekong. (I found it, after a fashion, in north-east Thailand, but at the same time got myself arrested for spying. I had to leave the country in a hurry, overland. My film of a 200-pounder and an eighty-pound *Probarbus*, a cousin of the mahseer, was confiscated.) But now there could be no more diversions or holding back.

A plan of sorts crystallized. Paul was embroiled with business but I had time on my hands, so I would go alone. This is my normal, and preferred, modus operandi; but this time my pre-trip apprehension was way beyond its normal limit. Heeding advice to avoid Kinshasa, I bought a return ticket, from a now defunct French charter company, to Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, and a three-month visa for Zaire, whose north-west corner faces CAR across the Ubangui River.

From then on, my plan was pure wishful thinking. Once over the Zaire border, I would attempt to cut south, into the rainforest, to the top of the main river's giant arc, where, if my guesswork was correct, it would be low water. I would then look for a village to stay in, hire or borrow a dug-out *pirogue* and do some fishing — then retrace my steps to Bangui.

But a couple of key things were particularly uncertain. I had heard that the border between CAR and Zaire sometimes closes — suddenly, inexplicably, and indefinitely. Nobody could tell me the current situation. There was an outside chance I wouldn't get past first base.

Potentially more disastrous was the possibility that once inside Zaire I wouldn't be able to get back out. The only visa I had been able to obtain for CAR permitted a single, two-day entry only. I didn't know how I was going to get back into Bangui to fly home, and not even the CAR embassy in Paris could enlighten me. (Getting a second visa from their embassy in Kinshasa, a there-and-back river trip of maybe a couple of months, was out of the question.) The only way to find out the answer was to go.

I was also concerned that my air ticket had a fixed return date. Normally I like to have an open return, but flights out were so infrequent and heavily booked that this would have entailed an endless wait at the end of the trip. I plumped for two and a half months. With all the uncertainties about travel inside Zaire, I hoped this would be enough — preferably with a safety margin.

* * *

My mental image of Africa duly became an oval-framed, silent, night-time picture of airport buildings. The airlock opened and this became reality. I was swept away in a stampede of returning students and businessmen, hard-faced Frenchwomen, and miscellaneous white-bearded friars all fighting to spill the contents of their bags onto the luggage-search tables. A figure urgently whispered that fifty French francs would short-cut the formalities; but I was in no hurry, and I have a thing about not paying bribes. I sat down on my filled-to-bursting rucksack with the following thought going through my mind:

If knowledge is power, I am powerless over what happens next.

**Chapter Twelve**

# Step in the Dark

Jeremy Wade

Whether scared or simply fighting the body's craving to be spared this discomfort, I carry back up with me vivid details which have about them the aura of being acquired against the odds, of having been wrested from somewhere obscure.

James Hamilton-Paterson, *Playing with Water* (1987)

I was lying in a transparent white box, through the walls of which I could see a bare wood-plank cubicle swimming in yellow light. Cackling voices in the darkness beyond were calling my name. (Somewhere out there too, I remembered, there was an old man with a bow and arrows.) Next to the single bulb on the wall, something like a bunched, disembodied hand cast a wide black stripe across half the room. A two-dimensional shape detached itself from the darkness above and fluttered onto the wall immediately below the bulb. It was a nightmarish wolf's head: ears pointed and alert, grey muzzle tapering and expressionless, unblinking eyes looking straight into mine.

I tried to wake up but couldn't. My eyes were already open. The hand was a monstrous spider, the wolf's head a giant moth. The white box was my mosquito net. But the voices were exactly what they appeared to be: shrieked cries, now punctuated by deafening crashes on walls and doors all around me, *of a first name I had told nobody.* An elemental terror stirred inside me. In the silence that suddenly fell I could hear the echo of its footsteps. The spider sprang on the moth and pierced it with an audible crunch.

In the morning I awoke exhausted. The night-terror had departed as abruptly as its inexplicable harbingers, but not before uncaging a menagerie of lesser fears, which had prowled for half the night. One had been my fear of what might lie in wait across the river. My carefully nurtured optimism was replaced by mind-freezing vertigo, the certain knowledge that I was way out of my depth — and a feeling of aloneness that was almost unbearable. I was prevented from calling everything off only by the thought of what lay behind me: a lifeless limbo on the 'people mountain', with no job, no secure home and no future, where any transient glimmers of light merely served to intensify the pervading gloom. It was this repellent prospect, as much as any attraction for the far horizon, that had sent me here. I could only go forward.

But the only way I was going to cope, I realized, was by making a conscious

adjustment to my state of mind — not the semi-automatic procedure that takes a couple of days in India, but something more urgent and far-reaching: don't look ahead, don't look down, focus the attention on one step at a time.

Step one was cautiously to creak open the door for my first view of Africa by day. Pale sunlight filtered through tall greenery on the fringe of a grassy compound, gently mocking my memories of night-spirits. The aged nightwatchman greeted me with a nervous smile.

A track led up to the main highway, where a shared taxi absorbed me into its press of bodies and carried me the six arrow-straight kilometres to the city centre. At the immigration office, where I called for my exit visa, I asked how I was to obtain the visa for re-entering the country in two months' time (assuming the border was still open). The answer seemed to defy normal chronology, but was emphatically repeated. They would give me permission to enter after I had done so, through the riverside border checkpoint.

I was all set to take the ferry across to Zongo: Zaire.

After the one-hour-plus search at the *Agence Nationale de Documentation* in Zongo, during which everything — notebooks, reading material, medicines, wallet — was gone through in minutest detail, there came a question I was totally unprepared for: what was my exact itinerary?

'My itinerary? I don't know — I want to find a piece of river somewhere and do some fishing. It is necessary to look for lorries and boats and ask where they are going,' I replied in slightly imprecise French.

'No, you can't do that. You must have an itinerary. Write it here.'

In other circumstances I would have made something up, but my passport had to be stamped at every town I passed through, after which I would be exiting through this same border post, where any deviation could be instantly picked up — and carried the risk of a 'fine' or (if the grapevine were to be believed) being sent back who knows how many days to collect a missing stamp. For the umpteenth time I pored over my map. Which of those brightly coloured, optimistic-looking lines were still passable roads? Which of the rivers were navigable? How long were the intervals between trucks and boats? They were telling me to hurry up. The course of the next two months was fixed in less than two minutes.

Because Zairean currency cannot legally be brought in from outside, I was ushered to an anonymous-looking building that turned out to be the bank, which was opened specially for me. It exchanged only dollars, cash, of which I had but an emergency reserve. The rate was punitive. I enquired where the next bank was and registered the answer — Kisangani — with dismay. That was 700 miles away, twice as far as I planned to go. But changing anything unofficially would create an embarrassing discrepancy on my currency declaration form. I reluctantly returned to the AND with a request to add Kisangani to my circuit.

'No, that's now fixed.' They were busy searching a truck. 'And if you go anywhere where you are not authorized, *Monsieur le professeur*, you are in big trouble.'

The next day, two hours before dusk, I joined thirty-two other people and their luggage aboard a lorry bound for Gemena, 150 miles distant and the main town in this corner of Zaire. The bumpy earth road wound through patchy woodland; we were not yet among the continuous tall trees of the true rainforest. Just after dark, lightning flashed in the sky; then the wind came, eddying the red dust of the road onto our heads. We stopped and rolled back a thick tarpaulin to cover us. To the drumming and plashing of the rain above, the passengers exchanged animated conversation in Lingala, the main language of the greater part of Zaire, the audience punctuating each narrative with grunts of approval and comical, high-pitched squeaks of amazement. Periodically we had to push up our sagging ceiling to empty the lake that was forming above our heads. When the storm finally stopped, the truck tried to start, but without success. Nobody was perturbed. It got going after about an hour, but then became bogged down in the mud. All attempts to move failed; we spent the night embedded in the road.

Shortly after dawn the next day, after much scooping of mud, laying of palm branches, pushing, shoving and wheelspinning, the truck (minus passengers) reared out of its axle-deep hole, accelerated along the slimy, serpentine ruts for perhaps fifty yards, then slewed off the road, roaring and snorting, towards a solitary mud hut. Brakes and steering were powerless against momentum. The words emblazoned across the top of the cab, until then a curious irrelevance, suddenly became singularly appropriate. They were: 'Sorry for You'. But at the last moment, like a demented elephant on skis, the truck slalomed between the hut and a palm tree, with just inches to spare on either side. Above the chuckling idle of the now stationary vehicle, you could just hear thirty-three pairs of lungs exhale in quiet, perfect synchrony.

Pushing on — the road going from slimy to sticky to crusty to, eventually, dusty again — we presently came to a ferry. It was here that I saw my first African fish, on sale at some ramshackle roadside kiosks. With skins mummified black by smoke and lightly powdered with road-dust, there were slim, dace-like *mokobe* (pronounced mo-ko-be; all Lingala words split in this way, each syllable starting with a consonant), sideplate-sized *liyanga*, and a two-foot-long snake-headed predator, reminiscent of the Indian murral, called *mongousu*. It briefly slipped back into my mind what I was doing here.

It was also here that I had my first encounter with *kwanga*. Undoing a tight wrapping of banana leaves, I cautiously sank my incisors into a glutinous, waxy-white cylinder. The odour was scarcely noticeable at first; but the instant I became sensitized it was like a punch in the nose. Steamed manioc paste (the root having been soaked before preparation to get rid of the cyanide it contains) is Central Africa's staple source of carbohydrate. It is also, so help me, the one acquired taste in this world that I shall never be able to acquire.

Soon after the ferry, the road cut a close-walled ravine through the first pocket of true forest. Weak illumination came from a narrow crack far above. The truck

stopped and we walked a narrow twilit path between the trees to collect water from a stream.

We reached Gemena after twenty-two hours, our skins lathered in a porridge of sweat and dust. The owner of the truck, perhaps because I had helped to excavate his vehicle, refused to accept my payment.

Gemena was the size of a small English market town, laid out around a rough rectangle of dusty, undulating tracks, and showing a characteristic division. We came to rest outside the market, focal point of the *cité*, the main residential area. The official and administrative buildings of the *ville*, relics of colonial days, stood aloof on the higher ground of the mile-distant opposite corner.

After an exhausting trudge round three sides of the rectangle, I eventually found a hotel. It had no light and no water, neither for washing nor drinking. In my concrete-walled oven of a room there was a washing cubicle with a floor of sharp, loose stones for drainage. It stank of urine. I walked into the dark town to find some water, which I dosed with purification tablets and drank. In the hotel corridor a figure whom I couldn't see asked me the purpose of my journey.

Not many trucks left Gemena along the road I wanted to take. Expect to wait a few days, I was told. This at least gave a chance to reach some kind of equilibrium before proceeding further. I moved to the curiously named Hotel 22 Sport, where one of the resident 'wives' was relocated in order to make space for the surprise full-time guest, and where I spent the nights tormented by bed bugs, alarmed by rats running along the shredded mat ceiling, and woken by shouts of 'Janine! Janine!' from outside the room next door. It was a considerable improvement.

Despite what had been said in Zongo, I found a bank, which performed a 3¼-hour transmutation of traveller's cheques into a brick of zaires. (Large-denomination notes are worthless in the villages, where nobody has enough change to accept them.) I partially banished my normal fastidiousness about food — always a significant step — and started to eat proper meals: *madeso* (beans), soup made from *makayabo* (dried fish), and *mpondu* (the spinach-like leaves of manioc). I quenched my thirst with mugfuls of an opaque, frothy, acidic beverage from a roadside stall, straining with my teeth the dead ants that floated on the surface. Shortly afterwards I caught and recovered from a spell of high-pressure puking. Part of me, at least, was acclimatizing. I was ready to move on.

The next leg of my journey, after some confusion over where to find the truck, was straightforward: not too many passengers, a newish vehicle, and a good, dry road through a strip of open country. My destination was Businga, on the Mongala River, a tributary of the Zaire that had been mentioned to me as being noted for its fish. On arrival, I put up in a collection of round huts adjacent to a bar, superficially pleasant but again home to herds of bed bugs, which I was fast coming to hate even more than mosquitoes. They were completely undeterred by all repellents, and their mobility and telepathic powers denied me the satisfaction of revenge. (Just to *think*

about snapping on the torch sent them scuttling into hiding.) The nights were spent scratching much and sleeping little.

After a couple of days I drew on some of my residual energy for the chore of taking my rods to the river: their first visit to African water. After a long, hot walk to the other side of town, I looked down from a metal bridge on black water flowing between steep, tree-fringed banks. I descended and, in confirmation of what Gillet had said about the necessity of boats, found only one accessible piece of bank from which it was possible to reach any significant area of water.

A crowd several dozen strong gathered to watch me dunk small pieces of bread, maize, manioc and worm into the quieter water at the side. I had a few slight taps on the latter two but hooked nothing. With time running out I set up my heavier rod and attached a bright silver spoon. One cast ... two casts ... three casts ...

*WHAM!* — a million volts from a snagged power cable vaporized the nerves of my right arm. Simultaneously, forty-five yards away on the edge of an eddy, a pillar of white light erupted through the surface. A millisecond later there was just a limp rod and a circle of ripples. And a little piece of tinkling metal catapulting back through the air. Something else Gillet had said had just been dramatically confirmed. I examined the flickering after-image and estimated a weight of about ten pounds. Whether it had been goliath or *forskahlii* was impossible to say. The lure was dispatched back into the lair. No response. A succession of its jittery colleagues followed, searching the area until late afternoon. Still nothing. But surely it had been a good omen. Somewhere through the haze of my lethargy I felt my sense of purpose reawakening.

But I was unable to explore the Mongala further. The virtual non-existence of onward travel opportunities meant that my best long-term strategy was now to make as quickly as possible for the main river, concentrate my efforts there, then make an equally single-minded effort to get out. This meant staying near my hut and being prepared to move at a moment's notice — although it was a virtual certainty that nothing would happen for days. But if I disappeared to the river I was certain to miss any chance that did come.

Some of this waiting time, at least, was put to good use. Jean, a part-time pastor who was also an occasional fisherman, put the local Lingala names to my photocopied pictures of African species. The large, cylindrical *Clarias* catfish is *ngolo.* The electric catfish *Malapterurus electricus* is *nina.* The Nile perch, however, is always known by its French name, *capitaine.* Goliath is known as *poisson tigre* (tiger fish) in French, but more commonly referred to by its local Lingala name, *mbenga* (the nasal compound consonant takes practice for the European tongue to get right). He also gave me some interesting intelligence on the fishing in his home region, the tributaries that debouch into the Zaire at the equator town of Mbandaka. Unfortunately I wasn't going to have time to venture that far downriver.

I also saw fresh, unsmoked fish for the first time, in large aluminium bowls on the heads of some women. Or rather I saw a selection of large, grey-skinned, solid

segments, from which it was near-impossible to imagine what the whole creatures might have looked like. One tapering, smooth-skinned head looked as if it had been extracted with great difficulty from the nozzle of an industrial vacuum cleaner; I was not sure I wanted to know what the rest of it had looked like. When I asked what it was I was told the price. 'No, what is its name?' A slightly lower price. This was to happen many times. The market women are a hard-headed lot; once they get you onto the subject of money it is impossible to change it.

For the most part, however, this period of waiting was one of intense, unrelieved boredom. For limited spells I managed to induce a trance-like state in which the passage of time ceased to be felt; there was just the periodic recognition that it had passed (a technique I developed during a five-year stretch at boarding-school). But I was unable to sustain this. I was travelling, unavoidably and for the first time ever, with a fixed return date, on which I was starting to lose ground. If I wasn't back in Bangui by then I would have no way of getting home. I was therefore caught between two incompatible imperatives: for the sake of my mental well-being I had to be happy with events flowing at their own speed; for the sake of not being permanently stuck in Africa I had to be constantly calculating, quantifying, and trying (with little hope of success) to force the pace.

Somebody told me there was a boat at the port, on its way downriver. I tracked down the Belgian captain and asked when he was leaving. He wouldn't say. I asked about the possibility of a lift. He told me to come back the next morning, eight o'clock *exactement.*

At the appointed time he was very cagey. 'If I help you, you help me,' was all he would say. I tried to talk price, but he was like a guilty politician on broken record: 'If I help you, you help me ...' Whatever he meant, I didn't like it. I would hold out a few more days for an alternative.

Two days later (a whole week now since my arrival in town) a Chadian with a Bedford pick-up offered me a ride to Lisala, which sits virtually at the top of the Zaire's great curve. Lisala was also not on my itinerary — but it had already become clear that sticking religiously to that was going to be impossible, no matter what the consequences. My only reservation was the price: two and a half times what I had paid from Gemena. But when I complained that it was too much, the truck roared off without me. I swallowed my pride and ran after it; anything had to be better than the boat. They were waiting for me round the corner.

The journey started with the front offside shock-absorber working loose three times in the first hour and a half before it was finally fixed. After that we made good time, the driver working on the principle that maximum forward momentum would carry us across the tops of the frequent unexpected drifts of soft sand. It worked: we only got stuck once. As we sped through the single-street villages, children came pouring from the houses, waving, pointing and calling to the *mondele.* 'They are very pleased to see you,' said Hani, one of my fellow passengers. Hani was an Egyptian and said he was, like me, just travelling to see the country. For some

reason I found this very strange — suspicious even — a reaction that helped me understand why so many people, when they questioned me about the 'goal' of my journey, were never happy with my answer.

We pulled into downtown Lisala, well back from the river, a couple of hours after dark. Early the next morning, refreshed after my first bug-free night in Zaire, I walked to the top of the hillock on whose flank the town stands. The English language doesn't have a word for what I saw. French, however, which is spoken by a small proportion of the people along its banks (a much smaller proportion, incidentally, than is generally believed), does have a word. This was no run-of-the-mill *rivière*. This was a *fleuve*. What at first appeared to be the opposite bank was in fact a coalescence of long islands. The true bank was a hazy band of blue-green on the far horizon. Compared to this, all the rivers I had seen before (even the 2,800-mile Mekong) were mere dribbles. Here was an inland waterway of such immensity that it was mirrored by a river in the sky: a clear blue break in the grey and white exhalation of the forest. Above me, and again several miles to the south, the cloud banks of this celestial *doppelgänger* climbed towards the stratosphere. The confident assertion of the Kongo all those centuries ago — 'the river that swallows all rivers' — could not be denied.

I wandered down towards the shore, to the office of Onatra, the state-run riverboat line, to ask when the next downward boat was expected, on its way out from Kisangani to Kinshasa. I wasn't optimistic: there is no schedule as such and the normal interval was said to be two weeks minimum. They surprised me: perhaps as soon as two days, they reckoned. I bought a third-class ticket for a small village that I shall call Basongo (to protect its anonymity, this is not its real name) about 150 miles away, then moved to a hotel — the Motel Complex Venus — that overlooked the river. Then it was time, once more, to wait.

My diary entry for a couple of days later begins, 'Today started early.' That is something of an understatement. It started when I was woken by frantic battering on the door to my hut. 'Quick! *Quick!* The boat's arrived!' came a breathless shout.

'When does it leave?' I heard my voice mumble.

'You must go to the port straight away.'

In an uncoordinated, semi-conscious panic I pulled on my clothes in approximately the correct sequence in the pitch dark (my allegedly super-rugged, super-reliable adventure torch having long-since comprehensively self-destructed), stuffed sleeping bag, mosquito net and everything else I found on the earth floor (except the frog) into my rucksack, and stumbled out into the night. A blurred mass of yellow light was drifting through the darkness below, accompanied by loud twangy guitar music and excited yells. I focused my eyes: a small town was floating down the river. I looked at my watch: four o'clock? three-thirty? It was just gone eleven. Tomorrow and yesterday were blurring into one.

The entire population of Lisala, it seemed, was thronging the port. I squeezed my

way through and boarded the platform of double-deck barges that was lashed to the flat bow of the towering *Colonel Ebeya*. I picked my way from barge to barge — between makeshift tented stalls, up and down worn metal stairways, along narrow, teeming alleyways — until I found a body-sized patch of clear deck, where I collapsed in a sweaty heap. Made it! I caught my breath and fifteen hours later we churned out into the current.

The Zaire riverboats are something of a legend, one of the few things about the country that one finds occasional, astounded reference to in the outside world. In a land where roads regularly become rivers, the rivers have become roads. And these floating juggernauts, each seething with as many as five thousand souls, are the main long-distance transporters. As such they are, above all, the focus for furious trade. Kinshasa needs food from its back garden; the interior, in return, demands T-shirts, watches, torches, beer, antibiotics, more beer, fish hooks, soap, sugar, stale bread (for some reason) and beer. Thus a constant two-way discharge crackles between boat and shore. Flotillas of pirogues, laden with all manner of live, freshly killed and smoked beasts, are sucked out of the jungle and sent back with fragments of the twentieth century. The universal lubricant and by-product is money. Many of the ordinary passengers are not travelling to reach any destination, but to make money out of price differentials. Produce brought from a village sells at a mark-up in Kinshasa; items purchased with the proceeds will fetch a good profit back home. For many this is the only source of cash in what is otherwise a subsistence lifestyle. Some people live on the boat permanently.

Having located my bunk, below the water-line of *Bambala*, one of the barges, I went aft to where the to-ing and fro-ing of pirogues was most urgent, hoping to catch, through the mêlée, a closer look at some of the fish coming in. The further I proceeded, the more concentrated was the livestock: chickens, goats, small monkeys (their lifeless tails looped round their necks to form grotesque carrying-handles), a dead antelope. Blood and excrement mingled on the deck: a vegetarian's nightmare. In one dark recess, two twelve-foot crocodiles lay trussed to long poles, motionless apart from their gently heaving chests, and their eyes.

After these spine-chillers, the fish (which wriggled, or feebly flapped, or lay on the long threshold of gasping, slow death) were, with one exception, something of an anticlimax. Most numerous were various species of conventional scaly design, vaguely reminiscent of carp, up to a maximum size of twenty pounds or so. Catfish representatives included one very ugly, spotted, large-headed species called, here, *mpoka*, seen to about ten pounds, and ngolo to about twenty-five. The only heavyweight on view, being dragged alive by a rope through its lower jaw, was an enormous thick-bodied catfish called a *kamba* (*Chrysichthys*) that I estimated at a hundred pounds. There were no tigerfish of either persuasion.

In the evening I retired to a makeshift bar (freezer, speaker, music by Zaiko and OK Jazz) on an upper deck of the main boat. Not unpredictably, I soon found myself

engaged in conversation. My interviewer this time was fortyish, of wiry build and completely unsmiling. The questions were the usual ones. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was the reaction to my intended destination, which we were due to reach the next day. 'Oh no,' he said. 'You can't go there.' He quickly got up and crossed to a group of men sitting at a long table on the opposite side of the bar. After speaking to the oldest of the group for a few moments he beckoned me to a clear piece of bench.

'He's right,' said the second man. 'You mustn't go to Basongo.'

'Why not?' I asked. 'Nobody said anything when I bought my ticket.'

At this point the first man put his face close to mine and shouted, his eyes bulging and his mouth showering me with spittle. 'You must never, never, NEVER go to Basongo!' End of conversation.

A little later, after I had returned to my original place in some perplexity, the first man came over and handed me an envelope, covered in the smudged ink of multitudinous rubber-stamps. I asked what it was.

'Give it to the chief of Basongo. It's your letter of introduction.'

The next day started with the revelation that the boat didn't stop at the village, but I was assured it would slow down. Georges, the crew member in charge of the barge I was in, came to my rescue. His mother was getting out there; I could disembark in the same pirogue. Oh yes, and the chief was his uncle.

By the time farewells had been completed, we were half a mile downstream of the village, a half-concealed cluster of mud-and-thatch huts, and had cut back out into mid-flow. I viewed the pirogue, twenty feet long but barely more than buttock width, with some trepidation. The year before, I had crouched in a tiny, leaky dug-out (with barely more than an inch of freeboard once I had got in) in the middle of the Mekong, halfway between Thailand and Laos; but this was the first time I had consigned my worldly goods to one. We slipped our mooring and peeled off into the rolling wake. For a second the world tipped crazily about our axis, but my discomfiture quickly proved to be unfounded. In normal circumstances and able hands, pirogues are quite remarkably stable craft.

The chief was a dignified man of about forty, his quietly spoken French noticeably more refined than that of most people I had met until then. Like all the river folk, he had been paddling pirogues since infancy and it showed in his muscular build. He scrutinized my passport and letter of introduction and offered me palm wine. Yes, it was all right for me to stay in the village: I could take a room in his hut. His younger brother, Adamu, would take me out on the river. But if I wanted to catch fish, this was the wrong time.

'But it's not the rainy season now,' I countered, suddenly confused.

'That's true. But here we are in the *cuvette*, a depression hundreds of kilometres across,' he explained. 'Floodwater joining the river downstream backs up here and

inundates the land. All the fish are in the forest; they will come back in two months. Nobody is fishing now.'

So geography had dealt the joker: a basin within a basin. I looked around and registered the evidence. Though the waterfront had held, remaining several inches clear of the tide, the village had been outflanked, encircled. A path just yards from the chief's hut ran as a canal, calf-deep in brown scum. But surely the fishing couldn't be as hopeless as he had said: there had to be *some* fish still in the river. It would just mean working harder to find them.

The following afternoon, Adamu and I stood in a small pirogue and pulled it half a mile upstream in the friction-slowed water at the edge, then cut a long hypotenuse to a point opposite the village, on an island that stretched between the sagging eastern and western horizons. There was no dry land at the island's margin, just trees standing knee-deep in water — water which continued without visible end into the echoing, cathedral-like gloom behind. To cross had taken seven minutes' hard paddling; to reach the south bank, I heard with some disbelief, took more than a day: 'You must sleep in the middle of the river.'

Tying up to a succession of protruding branches, here and there passing a solitary hut on stilts, we fished our way downstream. The river water was the colour of very dilute drinking-chocolate: not clear but not opaque. Its surface was dotted with drifting islands of water-hyacinth, known here in Lingala as *kongowasika*, 'the new thing on the Congo'. I was fan-casting a big silver spoon, paying particular attention to water very close in, where there is an abrupt, shoulder-like drop-off, when

*Bang!*

A simultaneous leap, wrench and scream of the clutch — over in the blinking of an eye.

I was shocked, angry, and exhilarated all at once. Adamu was impressed. 'Ah! If you come here when the water is low, that metal fish of yours will catch lots — and not just small ones like that. We have mbenga here to sixty, seventy kilos.'

In quiet anticipation, we continued searching down the bank.

We trolled a lure forty yards behind the boat, zig-zagging across the open river.

I worked a floating plug around and through a mid-channel patch of sparse reeds.

But nothing else responded; again it was as if a switch had been thrown. Had that fish been a fluke? The only fish in the river? A hallucination? Perhaps the answer would come tomorrow.

The next day Adamu was not to be found. I was told he had gone into the forest. Seeing me at a loose end, the village schoolteacher invited me to join him and some friends for a session on the *boisson raphia*, the effervescent, fermenting sap of the raffia palm. This turned out to be a strange experience: for, without noticeably lubricating the mind of the drinker, raffia-palm wine lubricates time. You just slip through the day at twice the normal rate. (Perhaps by filling yourself with its sap, you briefly get to share the tree's perspective, in which a passing day is of less significance, a smaller proportion of a life.)

I also spent some time in conversation with a a quiet, smiling young man who introduced himself as Félix. This in itself was unusual as it contravened President Mobutu's decree that all Zairois should use 'authentic' African names. Félix was also the only person I met in Zaire who could speak some English, and he took great delight in telling the following joke against his compatriots to somebody who would appreciate it. When the Zairois sing along to Bob Marley (one of the few foreign musicians who is known inside Zaire), the closest they get in Lingala to 'No Woman No Cry' is *'Yo boma nyoka'*: 'You kill the snake.'

In the days that followed, I managed a few more excursions onto the river; but everything that was wobbled, flashed or spun through the water was resolutely ignored. Or maybe just not seen. It looked more and more as if the chief had been right.

On top of that, Adamu was becoming more and more elusive. Sometimes two or three days passed without sight of him. I tried making alternative arrangements, but my host made it clear that this was not permitted. He wanted to keep tabs on me, ostensibly out of concern for my safety, but also, I am sure, out of a certain residue of suspicion. This institutionalized paranoia was an aspect of Zaire that I found increasingly hard to take. Almost everywhere I went, no matter how remote, somebody would question me in detail about what I was doing, in a manner that made it quite clear that he was not merely a curious civilian. The entries in my diary became furtive and pre-censored. Even if your motives are harmless, Zaire is a difficult country to relax in.

On the rare occasions when Adamu did show up, we more often went out not to fish the river but to check his nets in the forest, or to empty *boisson* from his pots in the palm-tops. Every time the results were the same. The wine was always brimming, and, drunk straight from the tree, was one of the most refreshing drinks I have ever tasted. But the tattered fine-mesh gill nets, strung between flexible sticks standing in five feet of water, never had anything in them.

This was when the full significance of the fish famine finally penetrated my self-centredness. Something in Adamu's expression as he pulled up yet another empty net told me that here was somebody who was very hungry, and I was ashamed that I hadn't noticed it before. While I was merely experiencing hunger as a passing inconvenience, cushioned by a reserve of fat and the knowledge that I was moving on, the people of the village had been suffering for weeks — and would continue to do so for several more.

And it wasn't just fish that were scarce. With most of the land under water, any significant cultivation was impossible. What little food there was came only intermittently. On some days you could buy small rolls of fresh bread from the market. And small quantities of peanuts were usually available. But anything more substantial, particularly meat, was rare. A few times I was given a morsel of fried fish (so somebody, somewhere, was still catching). I ate fried termites. Once I had monkey, which on this occasion was mainly bone, skin, hair and gristle. And once,

*Family group: Zaire River village*

sitting in pitch dark in the middle of the chief's compound, I was given something sweet, succulent and tender that I was convinced was chicken until my teeth crunched on the scales — crocodile. Despite persevering with manioc, I continued to find that even the merest whiff provoked my guts into an involuntary warning shudder.

On later visits to the forest I noted that the standing water was starting to move: there was a discernible seepage towards the river. The submerged village footpaths were also on the ebb, presaging the homecoming of the fish.

But this was now irrelevant to me. A sharp, painful certainty had crystallized. It was time to pack my rods and devote my energies to getting out. Fishing was at an end. My quest for goliath had failed.

Crushing as this realization was, it was immediately overshadowed by another. People had continually assured me that there were 'many' small cargo boats travelling my planned escape route — up the main river then off into the Mongala. But from keeping a weather eye on traffic during the two weeks of my stay, I had come to see that this adjective had been used very loosely. Now for three days I watched an empty river. In the middle of one of the world's largest land masses I scanned the watery horizon like a shipwrecked sailor.

On the fourth day, the *Ebeya* went past, on its return journey upstream. On the fifth day a small cargo boat appeared, carrying new Leyland trucks and Land Rovers;

it was continuing to Kisangani. On the sixth day there was nothing (although there was a rumour that a *horsbord*, a motorized pirogue, on its way to the Mongala, had passed during the night). On the seventh day there was nothing. I briefly considered going back up to Lisala then doubling back overland, but this would take longer than the time available. It seemed I was committed to a short cut nobody used.

Stress mounted. While time around me congealed almost to a standstill, outside I knew it continued to race furiously ahead. In other circumstances, the two could have been allowed gradually to uncouple (and what a liberation that is). But for once the small bubble of outside time that I carried with me, like the bubble of air in a diver's ear, could not be equalized with its surroundings; and the imbalance caused a pressure that caused an almost physical pain.

Sleep brought only limited respite. I would go to bed shortly after the mosquito-imposed six o'clock curfew only to regain complete wakefulness at twelve or eleven. Seven or eight hours later, when I would just be starting to fade, the heat would drive me outside.

On the eighth day of waiting some people came to tell me they had a mbenga for me to see. But it was not goliath; it was a *forskahlii* of about four pounds. It was nevertheless the first tigerfish I had seen close-up. Its toothy grin seemed to mock my presumption: it was almost as if it had been delegated to bid me goodbye.

For goodbye, at last, it was. A small cargo boat arrived at midday, going upstream. The captain said he was staying on the main river, but the outboard-powered pirogue that was hitching a ride with him was bound for Akula, fifty miles up the Mongala. After a week of near-total inactivity I had to pack and take my leave in a matter of minutes. The chief's wife presented me with a fried portion of the tigerfish. The schoolmaster solemnly told me, 'Don't forget us.'

The pirogue was in fact two large dug-outs lashed together side by side, loaded with sixteen 205-litre drums of petrol. Surrounded by an aura equally tangible and dangerous was the bearded *patron*, the owner of this merchandise, reclining in the bow on two yellow crates of Primus beer. Stationed next to the battle-scarred Johnson outboard were the boat's tight-muscled owner-mechanic and his assistant. The other two men were the patron's junior partners. One of them, an engaging Jacques-the-lad called Ludovic told me they had chartered the boat in Mbandaka. At Akula they would transfer the *essence* and what was left of the beer to a truck, for transport to Gemena, where, he assured me, they would make a killing: an extreme illustration of the country's freelance distribution system at work.

But that scheme looked in some doubt shortly after we entered the Mongala, when the motor developed a coughing-fit that, instead of clearing, choked into a paroxysmal death-rattle. A twist of the throttle kept it alive, but only just. We were still moving through the water, but with respect to the banks we were now sliding backwards. Ludovic picked up a paddle and started pulling us towards the distant, reedy shore. I asked where the second paddle was. The patron prised the top off

another Primus with his teeth. 'We threw it over the side back there,' he said, nodding vaguely downstream. Then his eyes lit up; he had spotted a pirogue cutting up the edge of the flow, surely the only human soul for miles. *'Mama!'* he wailed in plaintive desperation. *'Mbisi, mbisi! Ozalina mbisi? Pesa ngai mbisi!'* Fish, fish, have you got any fish? Give me some fish.

He was answered by complete silence: the motor had died. The mechanic started methodically stripping it, using only one big screwdriver, a hammer and an adjustable wrench. 'No, we are not broken down,' he insisted through clenched teeth. '*Petit problème*, that's all.' A second, even sorrier-looking motor was produced, dripping bilge-water, and cannibalized for what looked like, under its crust of oil, a set of points. My proffered hook-file and emery cloth, for cleaning the contacts, were silently accepted. After half an hour we were running again, through the gathering dusk.

We stopped for mechanical surgery seven more times during the night: to replace, with part of a nail, a broken shear pin on the propellor shaft (the prop was continually fouling on clumps of kongowasika); to replenish the leaking gearcase with palm oil, this being carefully introduced into the narrow filler-hole by way of the mechanic's mouth; to unblock the fuel feed; and to adjust, several times, the ignition. The only worry we didn't have was running out of fuel.

Meanwhile a full red moon launched itself out of the trees to our right, illuminating the distant curtains of tall, overhanging reeds that rippled on either bank. The motor quietly moaned. The moving air grew cold: I couldn't sleep. Islands drifted past like ocean liners.

Up ahead in the sky I half-recognized the configuration of stars: it was the Plough, but upside-down, transmuted into the head and upward-curving trunk of an elephant. *L'éléphant du nord* — elephant of the north. I watched as it swung slowly anticlockwise on its invisible axis. As our path twisted and turned through the labyrinth of the night our nose was always drawn back towards the point on the horizon where that invisible axis was pegged.

The passage between night and day was shaded by mist. So, too, briefly, the boundary between water and air: my face and hands dripped wet with dew. Visibility closed to a hundred yards, and for a while we were cut off from everything. Then the mist cleared and there were small fishing *campements* along the banks. The sun drove the water from my skin and we arrived in Akula.

The journey had taken twenty-one hours. Already Basongo seemed to exist in another time. Akula was bustling, the major staging-post on the Lisala to Gemena road. I ran into a man I had met waiting in Businga a month before, now on his way down the Mongala on a cargo hulk. (Such reunions are commonplace; although the country is vast, the corridors are narrow and few.) A few days previously, he told me, the boat had been attacked by a swarm of black wasps. It had dislodged a nest on a bankside branch, and everybody on board — even those who fled to the depths of the holds — had received multiple stings.

A couple of hours later I was on a truck, with about fifty others, sitting on the familiar, battered barrels. Ludovic introduced me to his wife, whom he had met up with, all this way from home, shortly after our arrival. I made a show of being amazed at this second coincidence, aware as I did so that several people were looking at me askance. Some, I was sure, were trying not to laugh. With sudden embarrassment I remembered that certain French words don't mean quite the same in Africa as they do in France.

Another such word is *ambiance*, which elsewhere merely means 'atmosphere'. A young student started regaling me with what he knew of the *ambiance* — nudge-nudge — in Europe. 'You're at it all the time, aren't you: outside, in plain view, while other people take photographs.' I assured him this was news to me, but he refused to believe it. He fixed me with a knowing look: 'I've seen the books.'

At ten in the evening, having had only one breakdown (two hours to fix a broken spring) we rolled into Gemena. I told Ludovic I'd see him around and headed for the one place in town where I'd heard you could get cheap accommodation that was also comfortable: a cheery, pastel-painted brothel where the management could occasionally be persuaded to provide an airy cubicle without the extras.

I was in luck. But onward transport proved to be another matter. I started to follow up vague, cryptic rumours: 'A white MAN is leaving tomorrow, early. Go to the *Centre Commercial* at five-thirty ... no, 4.00 ... no, 5.30 ... no, 4.00 ...' But at the end of every trail was always the word *'lobi'*. Strictly speaking this means 'tomorrow', but more often it just indicates some unspecified time in the future: the Lingala equivalent of *mañana*.

After five days of this I was no closer to getting out. My money, apart from a few hundred zaires for my truck fare, had run out; I was now sleeping on the floor of a wood-shack food stall. And my panic was steadily mounting. Things were going to be cut incredibly fine — if I was lucky.

On the sixth morning the first mythical vehicle actually materialized: a gleaming yellow-and-chrome Nissan. But it was not leaving till *'lobi'*. There was, however, another truck leaving that afternoon. Just before dusk the frantic word came that it was loaded and leaving immediately. But it was nowhere to be seen. *'Lobi'* again.

The following daybreak a moribund-looking Mercedes appeared briefly in the road outside the hut. Yes, it was leaving that afternoon. The Nissan turned up. No, not today ... tomorrow. The day passed. It was just starting to get dark and brewing up a storm when the Mercedes, which I had all but given up on, chugged to a halt outside. The deformed, open-topped cage on the back was piled to above cab height with sacks. 'Get on, we're going,' somebody called. We were halfway through a circuit of the town, looking for diesel, when the storm broke. After sitting in the rain for half an hour we were told to come back in the morning.

At first light the smoothly thrumming Nissan departed for Zongo. I couldn't go with it as I had given the last of my cash to the owner of the Mercedes, which was at that moment standing with its cab tilted forward and the worried-looking

mechanic elbow-deep in its engine. An hour later the cab slammed down, forty-three people scaled the mountain of sacks and we lurched away, only to stop ten seconds later: a goat had fallen off.

It was not a good omen: the journey became a marathon bucking-bronco ride in agonizing slow motion, punctuated by the constant prods of a creature possessing 168 knees and elbows. Staying attached required constant concentration, and effort from every muscle in the body: to have unclenched the buttocks for one instant would have meant instant ejection.

And with the suspension locked solid, all the shocks of the unavoidable pot-holes were taken by the tyres and wheel rims. After a mere handful of miles the front right tyre blew. When it continued to deflate after it had been repaired, it was swapped with one of the four good wheels at the back. But this put too much strain on the remaining three, and each bump of the track was accompanied by the agonized squeal of bulging rubber. While the passengers continued on foot, the truck limped to one of Gemena's small satellite villages, where by some miracle an approximately compatible wheel, complete with airtight but ominously blistered tyre, was discovered in the yard of a workshop. Our load lightened imperceptibly as one man decided not to remount, declaring, 'We'll never get to Zongo in this wreck.'

By an effort of collective will we continued through a sea of truck-high, fluorescent-green grass into the late afternoon, when we came to a ferry. But the ferry didn't come. A rumour circulated that it had broken down, then that it had run out of diesel. Eventually it was established that somebody on the other side had fuel for sale; but the ferry operator was awaiting a donation before buying some. For well over an hour there was a stand-off. As we loitered around, the young driver's eyes met mine; I offered a shrug in sympathy. But what did I know? For this *touriste* the experience was ultimately a curiosity. As if reading my mind, he made a theatrical sweep of his arm. *'Voyez Afrique,'* he said with a sigh. This is Africa: take a good look.

Sometime around nine we stopped. The tyre on the replacement wheel was *'foutu'*, a word my French dictionary is somewhat coy about, but whose meaning was abundantly clear. Without thinking of the possible implications, the huddle of passengers tried to sleep. I shut my eyes and saw a yellow Nissan. A while later, metallic banging noises started to come from underneath us: the indefatigable mechanic, a simple, cheery giant of a man, was trying another permutation. Once again I marvelled at the matter-of-fact way in which those of his calling continually struck the most unlikely bargains with the laws of physics. But this time I sensed he was on his own: the passengers had lost their faith. I slid into a doze. The taps and bangs got further and further away. And then, a long, long time later, they stopped. The silence was shattered by the sudden rattling into life of the engine. *'Tokenda! Tokenda!'* came the cry. Let's go!

But all was still not well. As night turned to day, the right outside rear wheel started ticking, then clattering noisily. The stud holes had become dangerously

enlarged and with every wobble were wearing bigger. The wheel was about to fall off.

We stopped. The driver and mechanic informed the patron that his sacks had to come off: he would have to find another lorry at Zongo. The man was not happy. As we heaved the sacks to their temporary storage place I offered him a small handful from the paper bag of sunflower seeds that I had brought along as a snack. He looked at them and groaned. I turned and crouched to pick up the end of another of the murderously heavy sacks. 'Good grief! what's he got in here?' my aching arms and back demanded. I spotted a small hole in the fabric and bent forward for a closer look: sunflower seeds.

The mood on the lorry cautiously improved. At the occasional small settlements we lurched through, people were out hacking back the forest's tendrils from the track: it was a day of *salongo*, compulsory community work; but travellers are exempt. A spontaneous session of hymn-singing broke out.

In the early afternoon we rounded a bend just like any of the hundreds we had already passed, and there beside this middle-of-nowhere track, his pose a picture of studied indifference, was a man languidly proffering a smoked antelope leg. The truck slid to a halt in a cloud of dust, the hymn-singing broke up in disarray, and the passengers, suddenly flailing the air with handfuls of notes, cascaded to the ground in a cacophony of frenzied shrieks. Seeing my look of puzzlement, the eventual victor of the ensuing scrum presented me with a morsel. By now I too had grown used to a bland diet of vegetables and mummified fish; the moment I tasted it I understood.

Some way further on, though, was a sight that abruptly cancelled any elevation of our spirits. A truck coming the other way had given up the ghost. A quiet group of people surrounded the partially dismembered corpse. They had been there since the day before. We edged past in respectful silence.

*'Lobi'* was the word they had used — a linguistic oddity of Lingala that was extra specially apt for their situation: trapped as they were, even more profoundly than most of their compatriots, in an eddy of time where tomorrow is also yesterday.

For a long time we drove towards Zongo but it got no closer. It was playing a sadistic game with us: retreating as we approached. But eventually it grew tired of this, and our sudden arrival took everyone by surprise. Anxious to press on before I discovered that the happy ending had been a dream, I set off straight for the border post, accompanied by one of the other passengers, a somewhat nervous young man. On our way through town, we were called by a young policeman sitting outside a long, low building with a rifle across his knees. He asked to see our passports — mine carrying stamps that tallied only partially with my stated itinerary. 'How did the fishing go?' he asked as he handed mine back. He commiserated when I told him not so good. 'Go and see the captain,' he told me. 'He will be pleased to see you again.' I hesitated, saying I would hang on for my companion. 'Oh, he's not coming with you,' said the policeman cheerily. 'He's arrested.'

Being back in Bangui in time for my flight home was an indescribable relief. My only worry was having to stay in accommodation that held unsettling memories. But all that, I told myself, was safely in the past — so far removed in time that, now, I could comfortably put it all down to the imagination, to some obscure narcosis brought on by going too deep too fast.

Or could I? As I was checking in, a voice behind me bellowed, *'Jérémie!'*

'Yes,' replied the young desk clerk.

But Bangui (parts of which were now intermittently crotch-deep in rainwater) still had a trick or two up its sleeve. 'Come back this afternoon,' I was told when I deposited my passport for the necessary exit visa. But in the afternoon it was 'not ready'. Nor was it the next morning, nor the next afternoon. And so on until 'tomorrow' was just going to be too late for my dawn flight. A chance meeting (with somebody who probably wouldn't want me to say any more about him than that) and a complex coincidence led to its miraculous last-minute return.

* * *

I ascended rapidly, leaving Africa behind. A speck outside the porthole grew until it became a brown-and-yellow Jaguar fighter-bomber silently parked just beyond our wing-tip. The shiny black eye of the pilot's visor swivelled up, left, right (meeting the gazes of a row of flattened, questioning faces) ... down. There was another, identical plane on the starboard side, patchwork-patterned in the sunbaked pigments of the Sahara. After a long interval, our captain's voice crackled over the intercom: 'Don't worry, they are our friends. Shortly they will give you a demonstration of their flying skills.' With that, the plane outside my window plummeted vertically down, spinning through 360 degrees as it did so. The cabin was filled with muted gasps. For a few unreal minutes our aged Boeing 707 became the centre of a dazzling aerobatic display. Then our escorts vanished. In the afternoon we landed at Marseilles.

'What did you catch?' my family had become accustomed to asking whenever I returned from a visit to the water. When the answer was nothing, which was often the case, particularly during my early days of carp fishing, you could detect a certain resigned questioning of my sanity. Now I began to question it myself. Two months in Africa — for what?

Two months travelling for two weeks beside a river, for about a dozen sorties with a rod (average duration a couple of hours) ... for no fish.

But for now it was time to put such thoughts aside and rejoin what passes for the real world. First priority was finding some money. I was not successful. The young woman who had recently suggested that we stay together for richer or poorer, wisely judged it time to clarify some terms. And having failed to turn into a prince, the frog was discreetly punted back into the pond.

I kept sending off the job applications out of habit (everything apart from re-entering a terminally run-down education system) and many months later, much to my surprise, found myself inside a suit and a company car, producing brochures, articles and advertisements proclaiming the wonders of this software firm, that venture capital fund, the other motor oil. All very interesting. But when, after a longer period than I care to admit to, a voice at the other end of the phone suggested a combined raid on Africa, it took about three milliseconds to decide.

**Chapter Thirteen**

# A Region of the Mind

Paul Boote

In the Congo and in Lake Tanganyika he lives in his giant form, the well-named *H. goliath*. *Goliath* must be a fellow worth looking at, but greatly to my regret I have never seen him and so cannot describe his appearance.

V. Fox-Strangways, *Wandering Fisherman* (1955)

Goliath is unfortunately rather hard to locate, at least the big ones are ... the best season to fish [for them] is in the dry months.

Leander J. McCormick, in *Game Fish of the World* (1949)

A sunny day in that lovely, but most self-conscious of English cities: Bath. A young man — his dark curly hair tied back in a pony-tail, wearing John Lennon spectacles, and casually yet stylishly dressed in a mix of Oxfam and jumble-sale chic — ambles down the London Road towards the city centre. He's still a couple of minutes' walk from the bend, near the Hat and Feather public house, where the road dives off left into Walcot Street with its antiques market, Third World crafts emporia, and student meeting-and-eating places. At one point on the pavement, he has to step around a ladder leant against the outside wall of the King William, another of Bath's many pubs. As he does so, a disembodied voice from above says, 'Hello Martin. You're back then. Fancy a pint?'

The young man stops and without bothering to look up replies, 'No thanks, Mark. I can't. My bottom hurts too much.'

Mark Amis, an artist hanging a new pub sign, slid down his ladder before he fell from it.

'I've just had a gamma-globulin jab, Mark,' continued Martin, Jeremy's youngest brother, just back from Paris, where he had been teaching English. 'I'm off to Africa in a few days with my dear brother and a friend of his. No sooner had I got back, than they insisted on turning me into a human pincushion. Today's anti-hepatitis stabbing was the last indignity.'

'Where are you going in Africa?' asked Mark.

'Sorry, I can't tell you. Jeremy and Paul — he's the rather interesting gentleman whom my brother calls a friend — have forbidden me to tell anyone. It's a state secret.'

'What are you doing there? Fishing? That's what Jeremy normally gets up to, isn't it?' said Mark.

'Err-um — yes. I have been asked to record for posterity the capture of some aggressive beast on film, but I am not at liberty to say more. I have my suspicions it is going to be more a bag-carrying and cooking exercise.'

'Certain you won't have a drink now?' said Mark.

'I need one, but no. I have things to buy. Their list resembles an inventory of all the worst-taste items available now from a good camping shop near you. I am allowed a pair of shorts, a spare shirt and the clothes that I stand up in. The other stuff they are taking reads like something from Evelyn Waugh. Very disturbing. It is all very well playing at being Ernest Hemingway, but it's knowing when to stop. I must go, Mark.'

'Good luck, Martin. Send us a postcard.'

'We'll send you one before we leave — that way you get one. Goodbye.'

* * *

On my return from India in the autumn of 1989, I made a decision to travel to Africa the following year, in search of goliath. Before winter's end that decision was to have far-reaching consequences.

The onset of the crisis coincided with gales in the physical world. They roared in early one morning from the south-west, neatly disconnected the telephone and electricity lines, then messily reshuffled the slates on my cottage roof. As if anticipating the coming storm, I had retreated to my attic room the previous day: to seek refuge from the barrage of phone calls coming in from people who, in addition to ordering the usual fishing rods, now wished to discuss India and the forthcoming broadcast. It had been like this for months, and now I desperately needed some time for myself to consider what I was going to do next, and establish whether I really could act with the courage of my convictions. That night of revelations beneath the summer stars five months before, with all the new opportunities it appeared to offer, had played me false: it had left me with the impression that I could both have my cake and eat it. I had since learned otherwise.

For two days and nights I sat beneath the quaking roof, thinking. I had to choose between a dream of Africa and my home and business: between the uncertain, interesting life I had craved since youth and my secure base and livelihood. I could not have both — circumstances would not allow it. I chose Africa.

The decision was made with good reason. Months earlier, I had unearthed the notes I had made about goliath nine years before — the same notes I had shown Jeremy in 1984, on discovering that a new business demands almost every spare minute of one's time. Most of the material in the notes, I found, had come from one book: *Game Fish of the World.* I took it down from the shelf after work one evening, and reread Leander J. McCormick's African fishing chapters. His translation of Dr

Gillet's forty-odd-year-old account of goliath read in parts like a Hollywood scriptwriter's treatment for a high-tech-thriller-movie character: a pitiless, unstoppable killing machine, almost comical in its single-minded ferocity. I was again aware that if goliath in reality was only half the animal it was claimed to be on the page, then here was the world's last unexploited true gamefish.

But I also knew that Gillet's account had still to be confirmed or disproven. This was my one cause for doubt. What if the story was hokum — so much wishful thinking on the part of a man who had spent much of his life in the Central African forests, far from Europe, out of contact with other anglers and those species of fish that really can fight? I was mindful of a friend's recent experience with the Nile perch; a fish that, despite growing to enormous size, left much to be desired as a battler. I had no intention of making a costly and quite possibly dangerous trip to a little-travelled part of Africa, only to suffer disappointment. In the end, gut feeling overrode good sense. I had lived with the spectre of goliath for more than a decade; the fish had been my own special secret and had thrilled and buoyed me during life's duller moments; now, the mere prospect of seeing it was enough. I had to go. Someone had to discover the truth....

My renewed quest for goliath began, and quickly ended, with Gillet's notes of the mid-1940s. I could find no other first-hand account of the fish written before, or since. So I refamiliarized myself with what I knew already: that goliath was a highly predatory creature (Gillet wrote of fish occasionally running themselves completely aground during wild feeding forays) which grew to 150 pounds in weight, and lived in a 2,700-mile-long river that in places was seven or eight miles wide. And that Gillet's old fishing haunts in the south of the Belgian Congo (modern Zaire), as Jeremy had found four years earlier, were off-limits to foreigners due to extensive mining operations. We had to find new fishing spots. I pored over a map of Africa, and cast my eyes over a number of tributaries which ran westwards through the central rainforest, like the arms of an antique opera fan, converging to meet the mighty Zaire close to the equator. I named a few of these rivers during the course of a telephone conversation with Jeremy one evening. He agreed with me that if we could reach and fish them during their period of low water, we would stand a reasonable chance of encountering goliath. He let out a nervous whinny when I posed the question for which neither of us had an answer: 'And when is that?'

Then there were the practical considerations of how we were going to fish for and, hopefully, catch the beast. Dr Gillet's '6-ft. piano wire leader with 2 or 3 swivels' sounded a little excessive; and as for Leander J. McCormick's advice about rods and reels (saltwater trolling sticks with matching cable-drums), this nearly broke me up. The 3½- and 4lb-test-curve, tubular-fibreglass bait rods, in ten- and eleven-foot lengths, which had subdued mahseer to ninety pounds in the boulder-strewn rapids of the Kaveri in southern India, I was certain would be a match for even the largest goliath. A selection of powerful spinning rods and a slim, rapier-like, tarpon fly rod — all in graphite — would complete the armoury. As Jeremy compiled lists

of medical supplies that we might need in this region without doctors, I put together the prodigious array of tackle we would need during a three-month trip. When you leave home to capture a fish that no one can tell you how to catch, or just where in several thousand miles of water flowing through one and a half million square miles of rainforest it can be found, it is wise to travel well prepared.

In the meantime, I found a buyer for the business and put my home on the market. Neighbours in the village speculated upon my sanity. I think they felt cheated: no sooner had they accepted me and were about to honour me with the status of minor local hero (on account of a national television appearance), than I was leaving. It was a painful time. I had left Wales once before, and it grieved me to do so again. I told Alwyn the Post that it was necessary for me to leave now, to enable me to come back in the future. I'm not certain he believed me.

It was a time of lists and deadlines. Africa became just another deadline on a list I had yet to make. Jeremy and I met on alternate weekends to discuss the expedition. We agreed on a date of departure, then also agreed that a third person should come with us — not just to carry bags and share the cooking, but to bear some of the pressures that travelling in a remote area inevitably places upon the best of friendships. Jeremy volunteered Martin; saying that, despite his brother's profound disinterest in both anglers and angling, he would find our venture intriguing. Jeremy sold him the idea with the promise that not only was he being offered a unique opportunity to travel in a region seldom visited by foreigners, but that this was also probably the last place on this planet where one could still be certain of not hearing a Phil Collins record. For Martin, this was enough: we had our third man.

A few weeks later Jeremy — and David, an old friend from Indian days — arrived outside my house one afternoon in a box van, to help me move. Thirty years of my life lay around in so many tea chests, cardboard boxes and plastic bags. After a raucous night in the pub, the three of us slipped out of the village the next morning. We stopped at the clifftop viewing-point a mile up the road, and for a few minutes watched the faint blink of the Strumble Head lighthouse, three headlands away to the south. Bhima, David's dog, chose this moment to wash my face. His show of affection afforded me an opportunity to wipe away other moisture there with the back of my hand. David gunned the engine, and we roared out of Wales.

* * *

Our African travel plans had altered in the weeks prior to my leaving Wales, as a consequence of my telling Linda Mitchell about goliath.

'Find out what formalities there are for filming in Zaire before you go. No promises, but I might be able to interest someone in making a film next year,' she had said to me one evening. I did, the next morning; from a friend named Nigel whose business it is to know about such things.

'Forget the filming, now or in the foreseeable future, Paul' he said. 'Zaire is a country that is about to address a number of pressing internal issues. Go as a tourist by all means, but forget the filming; there would be untold difficulties even if they allowed you in — which I doubt they will, after learning of your intention to go so well off the beaten track. You are going to fish, of course? It is a case of "Dr Gillet, I presume."?'

There was a silence, then I swore roundly.

'It is? You mad devil. I *am* envious.'

'How on earth ...'

'Like you, I do my share of reading,' he replied.

'And what about the neighbouring country, Nigel — the Congo?'

'The People's Republic? Pragmatic Marxists. Now, you could try them; they might be amenable. One moment, I believe I have a telephone number.'

Later in the day I tried Nigel's Marxists, and the news I received was neither very good nor very bad. It was, however, rather confusing.

'Yes, you can visit the Congo,' said a pleasant-sounding man, 'as tourists, on a fifteen-day visa. The visa can be renewed and extended in the capital, Brazzaville.' When asked if a visit of three months' duration might be possible, my informant said, 'quite likely' — but only with special clearance from the relevant ministry. He foresaw no problems regarding a photography permit, though an application had to be made to another authority upon arrival. As for my last request — for permission to travel without let or hindrance in the country's remote interior — he said that this would have to be approved at the very highest level. By the end of my call it was clear that we first had to enter the People's Republic of the Congo merely to establish whether we could stay in the country for more than a fortnight. My informant, however, had appeared quietly optimistic about our chances of obtaining all the necessary permissions.

That night I rang Jeremy and told him we were going to the Congo.

'I believe it could be easier than we imagine,' I said. 'The man I spoke with today seemed very friendly and helpful. He gave me the name of someone — a sort of local Madame Fixit — who can help us once we're there. We can write to her before we go and she'll arrange for one of her people to meet us at the airport. In addition, Nigel is contacting a man who knows someone in the government ministry to which we must apply.'

'The Congo it is, then,' said Jeremy, sounding relieved. 'Better discover something about the place, otherwise we'll have a right carry on.'

'Leave it to me,' I said.

I began my research, and found that, unlike the Congo of Leopold II immortalized in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo for which I was searching had escaped the attentions of Division One despots and truly great writers. The People's Republic of the Congo — formerly a part of French Equatorial Africa and much smaller and less

richly endowed with natural resources than its neighbour, Zaire — evidently was the Cinderella of Central Africa. I could discover little about the country — even in a good-sized library — except that for a time during the 1970s it had the reputation of being the Albania of Africa. Defeated, I dug out my map and gazed once more at a region of few towns, fewer roads and vast tracts of flooded forest. A great part of the map was coloured green; only the blue, root-like tracery of rivers helped relieve the monotony. In a couple of places, like a 'Here Be Dragons' on an Elizabethan mariner's chart, was printed 'PYGMEES'. Clearly, here was a region that made the wild country I had travelled through in India look almost suburban.

Weeks later, days before our departure, I knew that what little I had been able to learn about the natural history and geography of Zaire would now have to serve for the Congo. Never before had I left on a trip so unresearched and ill-prepared, but on this occasion there was no alternative.

* * *

We assembled at the Wade family home in Gloucestershire: Martin from Paris via Bath; Jeremy from Swindon, having worked out a month's notice prior to leaving his job; and me, now from nowhere in particular. The back lawn disappeared beneath a sea of equipment as we attempted a final pack.

'Jeremy?' said Martin. 'What is this *device?*' Martin held up a transparent bag that contained an elongated plastic bulb and a length of flexible tubing. He was looking at the entire package with some distaste. 'I understood that chastity would not only be a virtue during our time in Africa, but an absolute necessity. This looks likes something from the Reeperbahn.'

'It's a blood-giving set, Martin.'

'Where is the blood? Are we taking a freezer?'

'Paul's got it. He's group O-negative, a universal donor.'

'I see. Well, at least that's one less thing I shall have to carry.'

There were similar exchanges throughout the day.

Soon, we said our goodbyes to Jeremy and Martin's family and set off for my mother's flat on London's western rim. On the way, the countryside looked ravishing: the gentle play of sunlight upon the biscuit-coloured Cotswold stone, stately trees, small fields and well-flowered hedgerows made all the more poignant and enchanting by the imminence of departure. My mother fussed over her three visitors and attempted to put five square meals a day into us before we left. She had first seen me leave with a rod tube and rucksack twelve years before, on my way to India; and, with great equanimity, had seen me pass through on my way to sundry destinations more than a dozen times since. This time, however, I sensed her anxiety. In recent months, she had watched her son throw away all he had worked for in past years. It is often difficult to speak words of comfort and assurance to those you love, and I was unable to now. The words just would not come.

I understand that the international aviation authorities are provided with regularly updated lists of criminals, terrorists and other footloose erratics, for whom they are requested to keep a watchful eye and detain immediately if encountered. It will not be long before the names, BOOTE P.A., WADE J.J. and WADE R.H.M. appear on these 'most wanted' lists.

We arrived at Heathrow, looking like three mercenaries leaving on a working holiday. Two six-foot-long, four-inch-diameter, black drainpipe rod tubes — looking suspiciously like a twin mortar-launcher — were hardly guaranteed to endear us to men of a security-minded nature. The ex-army, green canvas kitbag did not help, either. And as for our hand luggage, this was strictly not for the check-in scales, or for the eyes of any security-staff member who had failed to get plenty of sleep the previous night. My modest-looking shoulder-bag held cameras, lenses, a binocular, film, fishing reels, an echo-sounder/fish-finder screen, dozens of heavy trolling spoons, several thousand fish hooks and — how did *that* get in here? — nine pounds of lead. Jeremy and Martin were in a similar luggage-bound state. Somehow we made it through to the departure lounge, unmolested and still solvent.

Thirty-two hours after leaving London, we arrived in Brazzaville. We were met by Raymond, our Madame Fixit's fixer: a powerfully built, bullet-headed young man who looked as though he could handle himself — not only in a seething airport arrival-hall but also on the city streets a short taxi ride away. When asked the purpose of our visit by an immigration official, Raymond told him that we were here to study the fish and fisheries of the River Congo. The man wrote something on the back of our entry cards then, turning to us, said, *'Bonne chance, messieurs!'*

'At which hotel are you staying,' Raymond said in a strange and heavily accented French as we left the building. He named two fine establishments whose tariffs we had seen, weeks earlier, back in Britain. They were well beyond our modest budget. Martin asked Raymond if he knew of an inexpensive hotel close to the city centre. Raymond paused in his stride and gave us an assessing look. 'I know such a place,' he said, and hailed a taxi.

In the fifteen minutes that it took an overloaded Toyota saloon to reach the hotel, I decided that I was going to like the Congo. Abject poverty, the sure passion-killer for many Western tourists, was mercifully absent. (The country has a modest oil-wealth and, in the capital, this showed.) But apparent prosperity was not the reason for my favourable first impression; it was the people, the ordinary people. There was a laid-back informality about them; a certain languid, at times animated, but more often unguarded look to their faces that told me these were good and decent souls.

The Hotel Domingo, situated in the Poto-Poto district of the city, was a very modest establishment, but better than any of the hotels I had stayed in during my first trip to India. There was a rough-and-ready authenticity to the place. The ill-lit, poky reception-hall housed a sagging sofa on which sat a languorous young woman. We said good-day to her. She flashed us an enthusiastic smile. We signed in next,

and were at once scandalized by the price — 10,000 Central African francs per room per night, the equivalent of twenty pounds sterling. Raymond saw the look that passed between Martin and Jeremy, and reassured them that this was a cheap hotel. Our next move immediately produced mixed concern and mirth among the three spectators, the latter response being particularly marked in the young woman. We announced that the three of us would share a double room. The clerk muttered something about this being most irregular. I saw him look speculatively at my earring and longer-than-short hair. I watched him scrutinize my friends: two very different-looking brothers. The young woman was giggling now, looking at each of us in turn, and making comments in a language not quite French. Raymond spoke a few words and her hilarity at once ceased. We got our way, and heaved our luggage up crumbling concrete steps, through the warm dark of a narrow corridor to our waiting room.

I brushed my forearm against the bedroom wall as we entered, cutting myself. The wall had been artex rendered to make its surface stand out in sharp-edged stipple relief. Above, the ceiling was creamy smooth and plastered with mosquitoes. Raymond found the air-conditioner switch amidst a choppy sea to one side of the bed, and pushed the button in an effort to chill the mosquitoes out. I looked at Martin. This was his first non-European trip. Dives in Spain, France and Italy he had dossed in aplenty, but this was different. A measure of discomfort when travelling in places well known and well liked only adds a certain piquancy; experience the same in unfamiliar circumstances, and mere inconvenience soon becomes suffering. Martin returned my look with one of such withering yet good-humoured scorn that it set me laughing. I sought the privacy of the bathroom to avoid detection by the sharp-eyed Raymond. There, more mosquitoes awaited me.

When he had gone, I volunteered to occupy the floor for a night or two, saying that I may as well get used to expedition life from the start. There was a knock at the door. Jeremy answered it. It was the young woman who had given us such a hard time in Reception. She wriggled past him into the room. I had just shed my shirt and trousers. It took us ten minutes to say 'No thank you, but ...' Jeremy and Martin pleaded tiredness: she would come back later. I pleaded my married state: lots of her friends had wives. 'Buy me a Coke. Only a thousand CFA,' she purred. She left, rejected but in good humour. I crawled into my sleeping bag upon the tiled floor, laid my head on a pullover pillow and slipped into sleep. My last words were: 'What's a nice girl like that doing in a place like this?'

The room remained silent.

Next morning our freelance Madame Fixit, having learned of our circumstances from her henchman, suddenly found herself unable to fix anything. 'It's impossible, quite impossible,' she snapped, from behind a half-opened front door. Martin had asked her about extending our fifteen-day visa. Rudely dismissed, we withdrew down the garden path. Earlier, I had scraped myself off the bedroom floor, heavy-headed and

puffy-eyed, after a bloody night during which the mosquitoes had drunk their fill. This, now, was the last straw. My spirits took a sudden and catastrophic dive. It was a virtual certainty that we would have to return to Britain without having set up a fishing rod. We regrouped at a boulevard café in the city centre. A coffee kick-started me into action. Our only chance now was Nigel's colleague's 'man in the ministry'. We saw *her* the following day.

By the end of our meeting with that most gracious and capable woman, she had drafted letters on our behalf to her own boss and his corresponding number in another ministry. In addition, she had copied in the Director General of State Security — the man who ultimately would sanction or veto our application. Next, she requested passport photographs of us. We produced them: a study of a burnt-out rock star from the late 1960s, alive beyond his time; an equally telling portrait of a much hunted international terrorist, a Carlos, grim and unshaven; and the third, surely that of the café intellectual who ever scans the tables for impressionable young women. These photos would in due course be affixed (countersigned and sealed) to a special authorization — if and when permission was granted. She seemed confident that it would be, but cautioned patience until then. We were patient. Over the next two weeks we got to know Brazzaville well.

A residue of the colonial past lay over the city; evidence of France's unique strain of imperialism was to be found everywhere. In another era, the French not only gave buildings and bureaucracy to their colonies; at the end, they bequeathed to them elements of an attractive and enduring way of life. Modern Brazzaville is, culturally at least, still very much a part of France: an earlier France, shipped south of the equator and left to evolve. To us, as we wandered the sand-dusted streets, Brazzaville seemed hardly a capital city at all, more a modest provincial town dropped randomly on the edge of nowhere. We began to sense a feeling of remoteness, of being cut off from the world. I think the vast sky and weird horizons had something to do with it; they made all normal modes of perception go suddenly askew. We agreed that we liked the city, that it was easier to cope with than we had anticipated. But there was something about the place — something odd, something forlorn, at times almost ... the word eludes me even now — that, try as we might, we just could not put a finger on.

One afternoon, at the end of an acacia-lined street, beyond the flaking stucco and iron-roofed buildings of a type I last recalled seeing in the film *Casablanca*, we caught sight of water. We had come to it late, almost by default, so preoccupied were we with red tape and domestic considerations in recent days. As one, the three of us turned to the river.

The Congo (as they still call it on this bank) is a river that not only invites, but virtually demands a stream of profanities from someone seeing it for the first time. Mere *Wow!*s, or a self-conscious, suitably awed silence, are simply not enough; this monster needs to be responded to in terms so obscene that you make yourself feel ashamed and foolish. Having regained your composure, you can then make the first

*The towers of Kinshasa float above the spray of the Djoué rapids*

move. But if you stand there — like a tongue-tied fourteen-year-old at your first party, swivelling the point of your shoe on the linoleum floor — you will be forever left wondering just what you have missed. By not approaching that imposing creature, you are compelled to go home, to intrigue and speculate fitfully before sleep comes, and gossip lewdly with the others in the morning. I rid myself, now, of similar feelings of intimidation — well out of ear-shot — before straightening my shoulders and, I thought, advancing manfully. The great river slid by, unaware of me or the other two admirers who had travelled so far to see it. We stood, spotlit by a lukewarm sun squinting down from a mantle of heavy cloud, gazing in fascination and awe. Then, so help me — I really couldn't help it — I swore again.

The River Congo at Brazzaville, I had read somewhere, is quite narrow. In reality, this meant that there was a good mile of water for our eyes to scan before they found the opposite bank. The river ran hard and smooth, at a fast walking pace we estimated, and bore upon its gently wrinkling surface a never-ending cargo of water-hyacinth clump and reed-bed ripped from the margins of the freshwater ocean that is Malebo Pool just upriver. The surface was patched in silver, blue and leaden grey. Beneath it, the water ran a rufous brown. I had no doubt now; this was, indeed, *nzadi* — the river that swallows all rivers.

We walked along the promenade, towards a group of huts which sagged beside the water's edge below this city road. For a moment, it seemed more like Brighton than Brazzaville: the sheer size of the river confused me. Outside the huts, fishermen cleaned and repaired their nets, boys float-fished with cane pole and fixed line,

others bailed pirogues. A young man was soaping himself in the shallows. Years of wielding the willow-leaf blade of a canoe paddle had done things to his body that some men in the West would envy. The smell of boiling fish rose from the sheet-tin and grain-sack huts. For the first time since arrival I felt at home; these people reminded me why I had come here.

Soon, a man was advancing upon us from the direction of the huts. He carried a large fish. Its round-lobed tail furrowed the sand as he walked.

'*What* is *that?*' Martin said in an aside, as he smiled at the man and at the same time endeavoured to appear delighted with the twenty-five pounds of fish flesh being offered for sale. The fish was a patchy brown in colour and unmistakably a silurid, a catfish. Its appearance, however, did nothing to enhance the reputation of that great and already much maligned family of fishes. In all charity, the creature could only be described as hideous. The three of us eyed it with unrestrained disgust.

'*Mboga,*' said Jeremy in due course.

Martin looked at him askance.

'*Auchenoglanis occidentalis,*' I said. 'What a beauty!'

Horse-headed and bewhiskered, this armour-backed, mud-coloured creature was part Friday afternoon job, part bad acid-trip — more *accidentalis* than *occidentalis.*

'Looks as if it's been buried for a fortnight then dug up,' I said.

'Mmmm, a case of *scabious corpus* if ever I have seen one,' added Martin, straight-faced as ever as he delivered the verbal *coup de grâce.*

This outlandish fish made a powerful impression upon me. On seeing it I realized just how far from the waters of home, with their familiar species of fish, I had come in past years. Across the river, the towers of Kinshasa, the Zairean capital, glittered darkly in the late afternoon sun. They softened in focus as I left my companions talking with the fisherman and wandered down a thought line that was only severed when I became aware of Jeremy shouting in my ear. 'Goliath, Paul,' he was saying. 'Did you hear? He's been talking about goliath.' I rejoined them, slowly. The fisherman had gone: to stalk better potential customers passing in cars further up the road. On the walk back to the hotel, we discussed what he had said.

Goliath (or mbenga as the fisherman had called it) was found in the river at Brazzaville, but there were many more of its kind further upstream. (When asked where, he had waved vaguely in the direction of the great Pool.) There, they grew to at least sixty kilos. I dropped my jaw, feigning alarm, and grinned. Once again the hazy afternoon air turned a little blue.

* * *

Life was not easy in that time of waiting. Morale greatly fluctuated. We wasted the days with endless cups of tea and coffee, cooked on a kerosene stove placed on the tiny balcony outside our room. We chatted. We read. We plotted where we would

go if granted permission to travel up-country. We watched the world go by on the street below and, as we did, we talked — sometimes guardedly, often candidly — about our lives back home.

When my mind was fairly reeling from boredom, I tinkered with items of fishing tackle: sitting on the balcony practising tying knots — Bimini Hitches, Huffnagels, anything complex would do; gloating over the new tarpon fly rod; setting and resetting the drags of a dozen reels — all the time wondering if we would ever get to use the stuff. Martin, having poured a continuous stream of scorn upon a certain item in his hand luggage (a necessarily weighty and impressive-looking reel named a Beastmaster) ever since leaving Britain, began to display an interest in what I was doing. As a man who lusted after large-format plate cameras for use in the pursuit of his own passion (landscape and architectural photography), he now admitted that he could relate to fishing reels, as examples of fine engineering. I was absent-mindedly turning the handle of a fixed-spool spinning reel one afternoon, when Martin asked to be shown its workings. I flicked open the steel-wire bail-arm to show him the way in which line spilled off the front of the spool, like thread off the end of a cotton reel, when a cast was made. Then I acquainted him with the anti-reverse lever, and the drag and baitrunner mechanisms. He took the reel from me and handled it, only passing comment ('Nice toy') when he gave it back several minutes later.

As for just where we would fish, if the miracle occurred, this exercised our minds considerably. Somewhere well up the Congo from Brazzaville, that much was obvious. Someone had told us that the small town of Mossaka was a good fishing centre. Another had said that a Congo tributary named the Sangha would offer excellent opportunities. Nearly all of our informants, however, had not left the capital in years: they had a cousin living there, or knew that big fish — smoked or frozen — often came down on riverboats.

After a lot of guesswork and some inspired pin-sticking, we chose a place. We went to the offices of ATC, the state-owned river transport company, and found that boats ran approximately once a fortnight. A boat was due to leave Brazzaville on its way upriver in a few days. It was on its way down at present. The price of a ticket seemed reasonable. The journey upriver would take about a week. Heartened, we visited the government department from which we would collect our permission, if it came through. It had not yet, they told us. We were asked to return in a few days. We mentioned the imminent boat departure and how vital it was for us to leave for the upper river soon, before the rains set in north of the equator and raised water levels. Call back in a few days, they told us pleasantly. We went back to the sharp walls and dull life of our room.

We had chosen a true jungle river, a tributary of the Congo, several hundred kilometres in length but small as rivers of this region go. We would start at the top and fish the river down to its confluence with the main river, travelling in a large dug-out canoe. We would halt at riverside villages and camp in them, with the

chief's permission, for a night or two before moving on. One of our very helpful new acquaintances had mentioned the name of a white missionary who lived in the region. He happened to be in Brazzaville, on furlough. We went to see him.

'Hi! I understand you guys are fishermen and wish to go down my river,' the friendly Canadian said. He looked and sounded like no missionary I had ever met: a mid-thirties, switched-on sort of guy; forceful, articulate and highly intelligent, the type of man a blue-chip company would value as a find for either R&D or marketing — quite possibly brilliant, certainly unconventional, yet personable. He poked a toe out of a beaten-up pair of trainers, checked his watch (the same model as mine) and offered us a Coke. We at once relaxed and asked our questions.

In the next half-hour we learned much of what we would need to know to survive a paddle-powered, six-week canoe journey down a rainforest river. We knew to within a few CFA just how much an eleven-metre dug-out should cost, where we must buy it, and more or less exactly who among the villagers at the head of the river we should employ and take with us. We were advised to accept the hospitality of the people we encountered, but not to overindulge ourselves on their palm wine; to increase the 'comfort level' of any government officials met with, by being honest and enlisting their help and support; and, finally, to watch out for the Gabon Viper, 'a very lazy snake' but a potentially lethal one. I sat there and watched Jeremy flex his considerable biceps in anticipation, Martin's facial expression alter, by degrees, to that of a new persona — fearless explorer, and felt my own spirits soar as I saw our dreams fast coming true.

We had been joined by a bright-looking young man, Charlie, a member of the tribe with which the missionary was living and working. Charlie was assisting him in the estimated ten-year task of first compiling a dictionary and grammar of the tribe's hitherto unwritten language and, with this done, translating the New Testament into that medium. The missionary referred a number of our questions to him for a second opinion. He was answered in good French. Jeremy asked Charlie about the species of fish present in his home river. There were many, he said. His people fished for them mainly with net and trap. Jeremy asked if they caught many mbenga. Charlie's face clouded into a puzzled frown. He shook his head. 'There are no mbenga,' he said. 'They live only in the large rivers. But we catch many kamba — the great catfish — to sixty kilos, perhaps.' There was an uncomfortable silence before the missionary repeated Jeremy's question. 'There are no mbenga,' Charlie replied, 'of that I am absolutely certain.'

Jeremy, Martin and I exchanged looks. The Canadian grinned at us and said, 'I think this man has saved you people a wasted journey! It would not have been an easy one, you know.'

There was a further silence before I mentioned another river. On hearing its name, he looked at me and laughed. 'You guys don't believe in making things easy for yourselves, do you? That river holds mbenga — sure — but it harbours other predators too.'

'How do you mean?' I said.

'Bandidos! There are pirates on the river who rape, steal and murder for a living. A couple of foreigners doing a "by dug-out through darkest Africa" trip a few years ago disappeared without trace. The locals say the pirates got them — for their cameras probably. There's even a story about those crazies attacking a big riverboat! If you *have* to travel that river, I advise you take a man with a gun.'

One of the missionary's two small children entered the room, mercifully breaking the silence that had followed the last warning. With his mind apparently intent upon another matter, the man reached over and tucked the boy's T-shirt into the waistband of his shorts, murmuring a few words of endearment to him as he did so. Then he looked across at us and spoke.

'I have a colleague working on that river. He's an American, our age, with a wife and two boys — what's more, he is a fisherman. You could go and see him and talk fishing, and really make his wife Becky's day! Bill can advise you about local dos and don'ts. His area is pretty safe. He lives in a small town with a police station and a chief of State Security, with whom you will have to deal on arrival. If the chief doesn't like the look of you, though, he'll put you on the next plane out — so take care. There's a detachment of Congolese navy sailors too, complete with gunboat. Quite a posse of sheriffs! Stay within a few miles of the town and you'll be okay. Really, that's the best I can do.'

We thanked him and took our leave. At the front door he firmly shook our hands, turned and went back into the house. We had nearly reached the gate when he reappeared and called to us: 'If you're going, you had better leave soon. The rains are beginning up there.' Then he was gone.

* * *

'How does this thing fit together, Jeremy?' said Martin. He was struggling with the aluminium poles of an A-frame tent. Jeremy and I lay side by side beneath our respective mosquito nets upon the double bed. Beyond our gauze enclosure the air was humming. Martin, whose turn it was to have the floor, was attempting to erect about half a tent-frame at the foot of the bed, across which in due course would be draped his net, which in turn would be further supported by lengths of nylon cord tied to a nail in the doorframe, an adjacent chairback and a cup-hook we had screwed into the front of the battered dressing-table a few minutes before. His efforts were accompanied by bouts of foul language and vigorous, self-administered slapping to those parts of his body presently under airborne attack. Jeremy calmly offered advice. There was further clinking, flailing and swearing. I ate a pillow in an effort to suppress my mirth. 'I don't believe it,' Martin said, as he eased under the net a few minutes later, 'I just don't believe it.' Then Jeremy diplomatically asked him to put out the light. The switch lay beside the doorframe several feet away. I extended an arm from beneath my net and silently offered Martin my torch. The light went out

to an accompaniment of further despair and obscenity. He regained his net. The three of us lay staring into the stifling darkness. Soon, the lightshow began. The ceiling lit up first in a dozen pale-green glows, then the air danced in a myriad of blinking lights: in addition to mosquitoes, the room was filled with fireflies. My giggles became a roar. Jeremy's laughter shook the bed. At length, a snort rose from the floor. And so we spent our first night in a small hotel in a small town beside a big river — somewhere up, then some way off, the vast River Congo.

The last days in Brazzaville had been terrible. The enforced inactivity, compounded by an impotence to make things happen, increasingly threw us upon ourselves. The cheerful banter and evening beer-drinking forays were among the first things to go. Jeremy now sat on the balcony, endlessly studying a Lingala grammar. Martin, meanwhile, kept meticulous accounts of our daily expenditure at the back of his journal. He knew — better than any local housewife — just where in Poto-Poto's Moungali Market the best deal on a tin of Italian tomato purée was to be found. I tried to read and write, and when I found myself unable to do either, settled down to idle musing. The musing, however, became a brooding; and when the desperate optimism I felt for our venture turned to insidious doubt, I was forced to seek a refuge in sleep. But sleep offered no escape, coming only in ragged snatches, with every one of its few dreams vivid and disturbing. In most, a procession of characters from my recent past appeared: to stare then turn away. In the rest, I was a prisoner trapped in a airless dungeon, or one newly escaped, running through a vast swamp with a pack of hounds on my trail. On waking I was frightened by the stark simplicity of these dreams; lacking the usual dark obscurity, their meaning was all too clear.

In the nick of time the special permission came through. We had been given carte blanche to travel throughout the country and study, photograph, and even film the fish and fisheries of the Congo. With the riverboat still upriver, laid up and requiring spare parts, we took a plane. As it circled the jungle airstrip before landing, we saw a great river, braided by islands and barred with beaches of bright golden sand. Anxious though we were, this sight — together with the elation that inevitably follows a long-awaited release — at once set us grinning. On the ground, one of our fellow passengers pointed through the cabin window, and exclaimed, 'Pastor Bill! There's Pastor Bill!' Minutes later we stepped out into the sauna-like humidity of a forest clearing and were immediately relieved of our passports by a plain-clothes official. We chose not to resist or argue. There was a quite a crowd on the tarmac, among them several Europeans. Something of a party atmosphere prevailed; there was much smiling and many-fold kissing of cheeks. A jolly Frenchman in his fifties came over and introduced himself. He was Père Jean, a priest who — both in appearance and manner — more closely resembled one of Snow White's seven associates than a Roman Catholic Father. Suddenly, the Congo began to seem like fun.

Pastor Bill, we found, was a six-foot-six-inch bearded giant who drove a motorcycle. With close-cropped hair and deep-set eyes, this man bestrode his adopted world like a colossus, moving through the crowd with a lazy, long-legged stride, smiling freely and alternately exchanging greeting and farewell with a good many individuals. From their enthusiastic response it was obvious that he was greatly liked; he possessed the easy informality which at once wins people's hearts. He came over to us. Dark eyes briefly scanned our packs and rod tubes before the mouth broke into a welcoming grin. 'Do I see fishermen?' he said in a deep voice. We nodded and smiled. I outlined the reason for our visit — it was good to be speaking in English again, to someone other than Jeremy or Martin. I mentioned the Canadian missionary, then goliath. Bill raised himself to his full height; his mouth said nothing, but his body was shouting: 'Now you're talking!' Some serious fishing talk began. After half a minute, Père Jean rolled his eyes in mock despair and walked off. Clearly, he had heard this conversation before, in French and Lingala, but to hear it again now — in English, of all languages — was too much.

'You've come to the right place,' Bill said in reply to my question about whether there were goliath in the river, 'but you're a little late. You should have been here a month or two back during the dry season — that's the best time. The river is rising at present, due to rain in the north-east. It's already two metres up on the dry-season low, and has another three to go. With the rains starting here too, the river will be rising very quickly from now on ...' Seeing our faces fall, he stopped and gave a hopeful smile. 'There's still a chance, though. There are some real lunkers in this river. I've managed to catch only a few 'benga — five kilos being the biggest — but a few of the fish that have struck, leapt and thrown the hook have been simply incredible! My predecessor here took one of twenty-five kilos on a handline. The local fishermen think that no big deal. They speak of forty- and fifty-kilo fish for sure — and some much bigger. Say, would you guys like a lift into town? There's a small hotel. I can run my bike back to the Mission and get the Land Rover.' We accepted his offer.

While he was gone, Jeremy and I discussed the vagaries of the equatorial climate. It was evident now that everything we had read in the scant literature available at home was either misleading or wholly inaccurate. Considering the paucity of pre-departure information, we counted ourselves lucky to be in the Congo at a time when the main river at Brazzaville was fishable, and this tributary — well to the north — was at least still worth a try.

At the hotel, Bill's presence almost certainly spared us from another check-in fiasco. He left, saying that he would be back in the afternoon to take us fishing. In a tiny cell-like room, we broke into our bags for reels and line: three weeks after arrival we were at last unpacking.

At four, the Land Rover reappeared. Bill wore the blue jeans and T-shirt of the morning, complemented now by a long-peaked cap. We put the rods and tackle bag into the back of the vehicle, clambered aboard and set off for the Mission a mile

away. The road ran parallel with the half-mile-wide river. The near bank was lined in reed, raffia palm, acacia and mud hut. Across the water, a wall of forest foreshortened the horizon. Above, the sky was piled high with cloud, some dark and towering, others whipped frothy white. The sun shone fitfully around and through them. The uncertain quality of its light only helped to emphasize the remoteness of this place.

At the Mission we met Bill's wife, Becky. She greeted us with a folksy, realistic charm. She hailed originally from the American Midwest, and came from farming stock. We were kindly instructed not to lead Bill astray in the coming days, by taking him fishing too often. He had a heavy workload: as pastor to the local Evangelical Church and co-ordinator of all the Church's activities throughout the region. In addition to raising two young boys, Becky herself ran a twice-weekly clinic. In an area lacking even basic healthcare, it was chronically oversubscribed. We promised to return Bill safely before dark, and not to corrupt him in the future. She gave us a beaming smile, and wished us a successful afternoon.

Bill collected an outboard and fuel reservoir, a pair of paddles, an anchor, a rope, a rod and a tackle box from an outside shed. A supply of small baitfish was found in a kerosene-powered freezer. Across the road, at the landing stage, an eleven-metre pirogue awaited us. We exchanged the all-purpose *mbote* greeting with a group of boys who were bathing and washing their clothes beside it. Bill said something to them in Lingala; the boys squealed in mirth. One pull on the starter-cord saw us heading downstream, with the bows of the dug-out briskly parting the surface mirror into a glittering furrow. We ran for a few minutes until we reached a long tree-clad island that lay a little short of the far bank. 'Here's where I had my pair of five-kilo fish earlier this year,' Bill said to us as he throttled back the engine. 'The locals here use cut bait — pieces of fish on a big hook — when line-fishing for benga. We only have an hour, so let's drop in the hole at the tail of the island and see what gives.' We cruised downstream, the trees progressively thinning on the sandy soil at the island tail before petering out to be replaced by reed and grass. On Bill's instruction, Martin drove a paddle shaft through the rope-hole in the canoe prow into the mud at the tip of the island, and secured us.

Slinging out fist-sized lumps of fish flesh, with ounces of lead uptrace to anchor them on the riverbed, was not a practice I had expected to find in the armoury of a tigerfish hunter. The same style of fishing had once caught me a ninety-six-pound *Bagarius* catfish in India, it is true; but then it had been employed out of necessity: to hook a sluggish bottom-feeder. Now, the quarry was very different: a dynamic predator and a gamefish. The true essence of goliath fishing, I had imagined, would be working a plug or well-mounted deadbait along a wooded shoreline, whilst trolling or casting from a moving canoe. Or that one day, a fly the size and colour of a small parrot would produce a slashing, heart-stopping take close to a tangle of tree roots.... Confronted now with the prospect of static bait-fishing for goliath, I felt cheated and put out. Then I remembered what Gordon Edwards had said to me

nearly twenty years before, when I had wrinkled my nose at the prospect of worming for salmon: 'My dear boy, you not only have much to learn about fishing but also of the ways of the world. When in Rome ...? Compromise a *little*. You will find that things become much easier, and a lot more ... *enjoyable!*' (How he relished the last word!) So I would catch goliath on bait (the method would at least assure a good hook-hold and the near-certainty of landing the first fish); later I would tackle things my way.

We sat in the canoe, facing downriver. To our right, the current swept past with a smooth urgency. To our left, a backwater covered a sedate hundred yards before reaching the left bank. There, two fishermen paddled a pirogue towards a scatter of timber-frame-and-mud-walled huts, whose shaggy reed-thatch roofs seemed the only interruption in a never-ending line of trees. The sun was held captive behind a cloud pillar in the west; the river-light grew grey and diffused. Small fish flipped repeatedly on the steel of the backwater. It seemed as good a time as any at which to start. We cast down and across the right-hand flow, waiting for the tackle to roll along what felt like a sandy bottom, before allowing it to settle on the outside edge of the tapering vee of quiet water that extended for fifty yards below the island. We tightened down to the leads with a few turns of the reel, depressed the free-spool lever to allow line to be given in the event of a take, made things ready in the boat, then began to talk.

We exchanged biographies then talked of India, the mahseer, and goliath. We learned that Bill had first come to the Congo in 1982, as a volunteer. After several years at a seminary back in the United States and preparatory training (which had included a course in outboard motor maintenance), he returned as a missionary in 1989. Although his previous fishing experience had been confined mainly to saltwater species, goliath clearly fascinated him as much as it did Jeremy and me. He was surprised, however, that three Britons (as opposed to three Frenchmen or three Belgians) had come all this way to fish. If *Newsweek* were to be believed, the British weren't so inclined to venture abroad after losing an empire. I informed him that we were by no means typical Britons, and with a smile let the matter drop.

Apart from an occasional lifting of line to avoid the many clumps of hyacinth bobbing past on the current, we had little to do until dusk fell. Darkness came with astonishing rapidity at sometime between five-forty and six o'clock. Bill started the motor and ran us fast across the grease-black flow. I reminded myself that this had not been a fishing trip, more a social occasion on which rods were taken. The serious stuff would come later. Bill dropped us at the hotel, inviting us to lunch the next day and perhaps another short fishing trip. We thanked him and said goodnight. It was six-thirty and pitch dark, inside and out. Along the corridor from our room, the toilet block silently throbbed. The 200-litre oil-drum that stood in a bathroom fitted with unconnected taps and shower held no water. The single strip-light in our room intermittently dimmed and brightened at the whim of a generator we heard labouring half a mile away. The air moved with mosquitoes. We left in

search of beer and food.

At a bar nearby we met a French couple. The young woman's parents lived and worked in Brazzaville. She and her boyfriend were visiting from Paris, and had been travelling in the Congo for two weeks. They told us of the elephant poaching they had recently witnessed in the Odzala Sanctuary. Men armed with Kalashnikovs were taking out ivory in quantity, and using the reserve's poorly armed guards for target practice. The girl rolled her attractive dark eyes, made a little *moue* with an equally prepossessing mouth, then hinted at involvement within the very highest circles in the capital. She continued, dispensing more expatriate scandal. As she did so, her partner gave us looks indicating his scorn and derision. She ended with a warning: 'Be sure to leave the Congo before September. There is big trouble brewing in Brazzaville. My parents have seen it coming for months. That's why we're seeing the country now, before it is too late.' I glanced at my friends, and we made to leave. Martin asked the couple about food. Further face-pulling. They had just eaten at a restaurant in the market district of town. They supplied directions. We wished them goodnight.

We walked the line of a suburban pavement, beneath the light of a row of streetlamps that had been strung along a well-made road at the eastern edge of town. A stone's throw to the east, invisible on this moonless night, lay the river and, beyond it, the trees: hundreds of miles of trees stretching in a seamless canopy deep into the heart of Africa. To the west, having tolerated a brief invasion of government offices, markets, bungalows and bars, the forest regained its dominion once more; spreading uninterrupted, but for the odd logging-camp or lake, towards the western boundary of the great wash of green shown on the map that lay in my rucksack side pocket back at the hotel. From the reeds at the water's edge rose the rasping *quark quark quark* of a multitude of frogs. Something in their well-timed, many-part chorus was reminiscent of the endearing cacophony of the bread-seeking ducks that were always waiting, ready to mock me, whenever I fished the Odney backwater at Cookham on Thames as a boy.

We took a left turning off the road, and at once stepped into mud and darkness. The sawing of frogs quickly faded. Martin flicked on his torch. A swirl of fireflies lifted in light from a fragrant verge. In a patch of mimosa scrub nearby, crickets mimicked a serious fault in an amplification system, varying this occasionally by sounding the final whistle of a soccer match. Dwellings lay on both sides of the track. In front of each, a family sat in lamplight, idly chatting or listening to the insistent pulse and keening guitar of Zairois *soukous*: Latin-American rumba metamorphosed into African electric dance-music. The music's exuberant rhythm lifts the spirits of the poor and downtrodden throughout much of Central and Western Africa. When a master, like Papa Wemba, stands in soaring form at the microphone, the music would raise the dead.

The tiny children spotted us first. *'Mondele! Mondele!'* (White man! White man!) they cried in bird-like voices, then flew shrieking to clutch at mothers' skirts. They

had every right to be afraid: folk-memory of the atrocities committed by Leopold's agents ('the scum of Europe') and, to a lesser degree, those of France, persists in the region nearly a century on. Mothers warn their children that, if they're naughty, the white man will get them. The adults, however, greeted us with friendly courtesy. A volley of *mbotes*, *bonsoirs* and inappropriate *bonjours* flew over cactus fences from the yards. We fired our greetings back. Martin asked after the restaurant, and received precise instructions. After a few minutes of puddle-hopping we reached Les Caprices de la Victoire, an outdoor establishment comprising thatch-roofed rondavels with flashing fairy-lights along their eaves, and a thunderous sound-system. It was a Sunday, however, and business was quiet.

A tall, handsome woman came over and showed us to a table, apologizing as she did so for the soft condition of the earth floor. Last night's storm was the cause, and today's weak sun had been unable to dry anything out. We ordered a beer, and asked after food. She gave us a long, slow smile, then walked off. As we sat there, a rat ran up one of the timber uprights and proceeded to busy itself in the thatch, hairless tail dangling like an unruly leather bootlace a few feet above our heads. The woman returned with the beers, poured them with great dexterity, then sat down beside Martin. She noticed the rat. *'Une souris,'* (a mouse) she said lightly, unperturbed, then asked in tones of intimate, breathy conspiracy just what we would like. Perhaps it was my imperfect French that made me interpret this as merely a variation upon the many generous offers we had received from the girls of the hotel lobby back in Brazzaville. Then I saw both Martin and Jeremy go on the alert, and prepare to resist advances. But it was of food that she spoke, and informed us there was *le steak* on the menu tonight, served *avec des pommes frites et les petits pois*. I needed a few seconds to come to terms with the unlikely knowledge that, on my first night in the African rainforest, I would be dining on steak, chips and peas.

After the meal she joined us once more. She said that tourists seldom, if ever, came to this remote place. The French couple were the first this year, and even they weren't proper tourists — with a family living in the capital. They had flown here in the hope of booking a first-class cabin on a downward riverboat, but as there was not one due for at least a week they would be flying out within days. She gave us a wistful look. In it I saw more than just loneliness tinged with regret. I sensed a considerable intelligence. Martin asked her where she came from, and why she was here. She told us that she was from the Plateau region north of Brazzaville, that she had read psychology at university, and that she was here to work. There was a weariness in the way she enounced the word, *travail*. Her name was Elisabeth. She offered us a bottle of beer, on the house. We talked until the imminent shut-down of the generator. We thanked her, promising we would call again, then wished her goodnight, and walked back to the hotel.

'How does this thing fit together, Jeremy?' said Martin. He was struggling with the aluminium poles of an A-frame tent. Jeremy and I lay side by side beneath our respective mosquito nets upon the double bed ... It had been a long day.

During our first weeks in the Congo, our diet had been unvaried. Meals were confined to white bread (French *baguette* stick, a colonial legacy), Dutch margarine, locally made peanut butter, Belgian garlic-sausage, grilled Spanish mackerel (netted by the fishing fleet off the Congo's short coastline) and a whole bunch of ridiculously cheap bananas. The arrival of a stove heralded the outbreak of a culinary revolution. Jeremy, no slouch when it comes to seeking nourishment, and Martin, a keen cook, were soon planning menus. What the resulting meals may have lacked in variety, they more than made up for in bulk. Gripped as we were in a stasis of boredom, eating had become as vital an activity for the maintenance of a happy mind as it was a healthy body. Now, several hundred miles removed from the street vendors of the capital, we felt a visit to the local market was in order: to see what was on offer in the way of victuals. We went early the next morning; it was Martin's turn to look haggard and dissolute.

The contents of the covered market will, for me, remain fifty-seven of the best reasons why a confirmed carnivore can switch to a vegetarian diet. The odour of the place spoke to us from thirty paces; its sad sights were quick to follow. Lying upon crude wooden tables, lit by splinters of light piercing a sheet-tin roof, were the remains of many creatures: crocodile (a dismembered claw, a strip of scaly hide), antelope (slender-necked, Bambi eyes glazed in death), monkey (teeth bared in a final grimace — available smoked or fresh) and fish, a great many fish.

The reader will already be aware of my fascination with fish. Since boyhood, it didn't matter where they were — aquarium, museum, park lake, small stream beneath a road bridge far from home, fishmonger's slab — or, for that matter, just what they were: the simple fact that they were fish was enough. Spread before us now was an icthyologist's dream, a collection of fishy oddities and weirdos that made anything I had previously seen taken from foreign waters look quite ordinary. I led the way towards them. A wheelbarrow blocked the narrow aisle I had chosen. I looked down, seeking a gap through which to pass. I looked up, and quickly turned to my friends. Their eyes followed mine, downward. A huge, amber eye stared back up at us.

We had found goliath.

There was nothing we could say, at first. We merely stood and gawped, in confusion, horror and delight, so far did the creature exceed expectation. Two things about the fish will forever remain in the memory: its teeth and its handsome mail-coat of large, silver scales. The teeth glinted long, white and dagger-like in a confident jaw. Behind the head, the burnished body-livery was stretched tight across a hard, slim flank. No misshapen freak this, skulking alone in the shadows, waiting for the moment of madness to come, when it would strike. No, here was a sleek, well-dressed killer — an immaculate man-about-town, doubtless liked yet also feared by the ladies. It weighed, I suppose, twenty pounds. Martin broke the silence, to blaspheme comprehensively. Jeremy and I added a variation or two of our own. Then, silent once more, we edged past the bared teeth and walked further into the

market. What greeted us there only set us off again.

It must have measured four and a half feet, from the tip of the nose to the fork of its wide-splayed sickle tail. The back was coloured a dark-green slate, the flanks shimmering silver, the belly of purest white. The long switchblade fins, extending from a gracefully curving body, were white streaked in leaf-brown or pale grey. Only the tail differed: the jagged edge of the lower lobe was splashed a bloody scarlet-orange. The head was huge. It was not merely the jaws, with their one-and-a-quarter-inch-long fangs, that staggered me; it was the eye. That tawny eye, even in death, possessed the unblinking look of a killer. It was an eye that could never know pity, or express charity or warmth or love for any living creature — not even its own offspring. It was an eye which, on beholding something, conveyed the information to a brain that simply assessed the item as security, threat, potential mate or food. If hunger stirred the vitals, then that cold eye directed the jaws to seize and kill. A shark had nothing on this. In death a shark is diminished, faded to an oversized dogfish. Not so goliath: though the body might be stilled, its terrible ferocity remains undimmed. Even in death, here was a creature you were at pains to step around and avoid. I hazarded seventy pounds. Jeremy nodded in consent.

We managed to take a few photographs before the fish's vendor — a stout lady *commerçante* — wielded her machete and, with a few sharp blows, hacked it to pieces. Several pounds of pale-green roe spilled out onto the table. My fantastic predator was a female. Within minutes the only evidence of her existence was a scatter of scales. We collected a few and placed them between the pages of our notebooks. We were still talking about the fish as we walked — laden with conventional foodstuffs bought from one of the market's Mauretanian traders — back to the hotel, an hour later. We agreed that it had been a very productive morning. The three-week nightmare in Brazzaville was forgotten. Nothing could faze us now: we had goliath.

Later, over a delicious Nile perch lunch with Bill and Becky, we learned of some of the dangers that beset the occupants of this region. First was the *tumbu* fly, a greenbottle by any other name, that lays its eggs upon drying clothes. If there is insufficient sun during the day to dry the clothes, and you happen to put on a shirt — damp and unironed — to go out in that evening, you could be in for some problems a week or two later. Tumbu fly eggs hatch into maggots which burrow into the skin, then feed there for some time before emerging, nearly an inch in length, from what you had thought to be an unpleasant-looking boil. 'They're really only nuisance-stuff,' Bill said, laughing, 'though my predecessor had occasion to think otherwise. He once put on a pair of damp shorts!' I saw Becky give her husband a look, then strive to control a smile. 'Then there's *Filaria*,' he continued. 'Now, that can be serious. Have you been bitten by any tiny black flies — we call them no-see-ums — since you've been here?'

'I have been bitten by everything,' said Martin, matter-of-factly, before taking another mouthful of the firm, white, perch flesh. I confirmed this. Not only did

*'It must have measured four and a half feet, from the tip of the nose to the fork of its wide-splayed sickle tail'*

insects have a liking for Martin, he clearly had something of an affinity with them. I announced to the table that I felt we had a frustrated entomologist in our midst. I cited Martin's interest in the ants that had appeared, looking for our sugar, back in the capital. (I did not, however, mention that I had detected in him a certain frisson of fear, as their numbers remorselessly mounted.) Then there was the praying mantis he had befriended at an outdoor bar one night. This prehistoric miniature had made me flinch as he taunted it, first into striking at him then flying about wildly to escape his repeated attentions. And last night there were the fighter planes buzzing the streetlamps on the river road — huge beetles and hawkhead moths — at times threatening to make kamikaze runs downward in our direction. The moths were fine; the beetles, however, can hit you like a well-struck squash ball. We all shared the joke at Martin's expense.

Bill continued his cautionary tale about *Filaria*. He talked of parasitic worms that can live in the human body for years, causing a terrible lethargy and eventual madness. '*Filaria* is pretty well endemic here,' he said, 'so get yourself tested when you get home. Better still, presume you've already got it, and take a treatment anyway. We do, regularly.' A little later, I was relieved to learn that bilharzia and river blindness were yet to be found in the region. Much later still, we went fishing.

At Bill's request, we took the echo-sounder/fish-finder unit with us. He wished to

check out some of his favourite local fishing holes, and see just what science made of personal hunches. The exercise was a highly educational one; it revealed to us all the magnitude of merely finding fish — any fish — in this great river, let alone catching them. Great tracts of its half-mile width were shallow and featureless, sandy bottomed and completely devoid of fish. We headed towards the far shore, where painted signboards (single and double stripes, arrows and crosses) advised riverboat pilots of the deep-water navigation channel's course in the reach ahead. Bill's predecessor had told him that, in his limited experience, goliath was always to be found in the depths of the channel — especially where it ran along a wooded shoreline or past rocks on the bank. This confirmed what we had read in Gillet's notes; we set about looking for these features.

After a while, Bill began to question the efficacy of our electronic toy, saying that in many of the places we had already covered on the open river, he had seen fishermen set their nets and pull them, a few hours later, laden with fish. Then we ran parallel with a heavily wooded section of the eastern shore. A sign informed us we were in the channel; the sounder confirmed it — twenty-three to twenty-six feet of water lay beneath the adze-hewn hull of the canoe. Ahead lay a number of trees which had fallen into the water. From the tips of a few side-branches visible above the surface, we estimated that these casualties extended for fifty or sixty feet out into the river from the bank, lying at right angles to the flow. We ran the pirogue over the submerged jungle of their upper branches. The fish-finder warbled into life, the screen danced with the images of fish: shoals of small fish. The image on the screen darkened into spiky complexity as we passed over what was obviously a particularly dense tangle of branches. *Baarrpp!* went the finder, sounding at its deepest tone. A single great fish, like an alien fighting-ship, shadowed the downstream edge of the timber. Eighteen feet above, four men in a boat went 'Wow!'

We turned away, into the channel, eager to put a distance between ourselves and the shore; the fish — whatever it was — might need a little time to forget the boat and regain equilibrium. Bill told us of a spot he had always wished to get the measure of: 'Downriver there's a big bweta. Bwetas are places where the water turns or changes direction; they're areas of deep water, often popular with local fishermen. This one, I suspect, is the mother and father of them all — on this river, at least. It's *deep*. Now I'm going to find out just how deep.'

The current, which had been following a long, straight section of bank, suddenly encountered a rocky spur that struck out abruptly from the shore. The obstruction made this side of the river more than just tarry awhile on its seaward journey, it compelled it to heave itself round in a ponderous, eighty-yard-wide circle. The surface of this circle was pitted with many individual circles — whirlpools — each one reminiscent of the water draining from an enormous bath. Whole islands of hyacinth and reed moved at varying speeds along distinct current-lines wheeling within the outer circle. Here and there the water boiled in a great upwelling: the result of an impact with rocks or trees on the riverbed below. Smaller items of

floating debris were sucked down at one point, only to be spewed to the surface many yards away. It was an altogether fearsome place. As we were jostled in the mêlée of currents, I switched on the sounder and at once let out a low whistle.

'How deep?' said Bill.

'Would you believe 78.8 feet? Rough ground, too,' I replied.

'Good grief. You could lose a riverboat down there!'

We returned to the fallen tree and the waiting monster. Having anchored thirty yards above, we rolled baits behind the screen of submerged timber. I knew that I should be fishing a small dead fish on a rig which allowed the bait to flutter enticingly in the current, a few feet off the riverbed. But it was getting late now; there was no time for finesse.

In the dusk, on our way back upstream to the Mission, we attempted to troll deadbaits behind the slow-moving boat. The hastily mounted baits, working much too vigorously in the powerful flow, caused the stiff, 4lb-test-curve graphite rods to buckle and hoop round. Soon, two baits simultaneously hooked up on something forty yards astern. We circled back to their point of anchorage, pulled ineffectively for a while against the bouncy resistance offered by a sunken branch, then snapped the 30lb-test lines and headed for home. Beneath the gunwale the water oozed past, thick and opaque, like dark honey. Bill said nothing. (Throughout, he had merely looked on in quiet disbelief, as one piece of tackle after another was produced from our big black bag.) I wondered if he knew what I knew now — or rather felt, with a conviction that presently manifested itself as a queasy gnawing in my stomach: that we were expecting too much of this fish. No predator — not even one with the unearthly, all-seeing eyes of goliath — could sight and track a lure in this water. All the flies, spoons and plugs could remain in their boxes; static baits were our only chance. We were fishing a rising water: the kiss of death, dreaded by anglers the world over. Now, pinpoint location of fish would be vital; we had to find them somehow, then drop baits on their very noses. We had a tough task ahead.

* * *

It took days to negotiate the hire of a pirogue and outboard, and the services of two *pinaciers* (boatmen) who knew the river above and below the town. In these days of waiting, the river was transformed. The sandbars and grassy islets, which had afforded the wide waters some small degree of intimacy, were suddenly gone. The gauge on the disused pump-tower near the Mission merely indicated that the waters were rising by between ten and twenty centimetres a day. But one afternoon, having watched the waters for a short time, I understood: a part of the planet was on the move. A tide of quite daunting immensity now swept past the landing stage. Borne on that tide was a burden of debris scoured from thousands of square miles of forest floor upriver. The waters ran as cocoa. Above them, the sky was a science-fantasy frontcover in massive reproduction. It was oddly unnerving.

Joseph, the older of the boatmen, accompanied us on the first sortie. It was a fine morning. The river spread in quicksilver beneath a bright sun. The forest glowed in hazy greens and greys. The hired outboard ran well. After a few minutes I turned to Joseph at the helm and smiled. He smiled back. Soon we were all smiling; it was good to be out of the dingy hotel room at last and doing what we'd come to do. We travelled upstream, close to the right bank, passing a few fishermen's campements and the occasional pirogue, whose net-pulling or paddle-wielding occupant would invariably raise a hand in friendly greeting. By ten-thirty, we had beached the pirogue on a sandbar below a settlement, lit the stove to cook breakfast and were fishing for bait. Our hopes had risen with the sun.

The small fish were reluctant to take. From time to time, they would spray skyward, as if a bristling perch, crashing out of a Bernard Venables cartoon, had launched an attack. Twice my bait was taken splashily on the retrieve. On each occasion the line was bitten through and the hook removed. *'Tomba,'* said Joseph, with a knowing smile. Tomba was the local name for the *lineatus* or — to be thoroughly modern and precise — *forskahlii* tigerfish, the smaller, striped relative of goliath, common throughout sub-Saharan Africa. (I had often smiled as recent returnees from a holiday in Kenya had talked to me of tigerfish: 'Damn great teeth, fight like stink — pity they don't grow bigger.' I had looked away, in conceit, as I realized that — to a man — they knew nothing of goliath.) The tigerfish before me now were small, to be measured in inches rather than pounds. I caught one at last; sweeping it from the air, as it leapt missile-like from the water, onto the beach behind. Eleven inches of dark-striped ferocity with orange fins kicked punily in the sand. There, the fish succeeded in severing the hook-length before I could despatch it. Had not Dr Gillet said that a small tigerfish makes the very best of baits for goliath? Sadly, this one would not be trolled or spun — a more ignominious fate awaited it: to become the ball of flesh that masked a large (size 8/0) single hook.

Jeremy had taken a spinning rod and was flicking a small bar-spoon along the forested margin downstream of the sand. He was wading. A couple of times we heard his yell, as a small tigerfish slashed at the lure and departed in a flying leap. Martin stood alone at the other end of the fifty-yard-long beach, next to a huge dead tree whose upper trunk had buried itself deep in the sand. The roots hovered, umbrella-like, twenty feet in the air above his head. 'Interesting rockets they fire round here,' he said of his wooden companion as I joined him. We stood together, in silence, staring at the bizarre piece of spate debris. Almost at once, I sensed his boredom. 'Would you like to fish, Martin?' I asked, tentatively. 'It only takes a couple of minutes to learn how to cast ...' He looked at me, made almost a grimace of a smile, went to speak but bit back the words, then said — quite abruptly, 'All right then. Why not? With the five-by-four back in Gloucestershire, I can hardly make a photograph of this tree — and your toys (he referred to the 35mm SLRs) will make nothing of it. Yes — I must do something ...' He lapsed into another thoughtful-

looking silence. 'Okay. Let's get on with it,' he said, finally, with a quick smile. 'At what end do I hold the rod?'

At twelve-thirty, the tomba — and a *tondi* (a small deep-bodied characin with a black spot on the tail root) caught by Martin — remained the only bait. We were discussing a move elsewhere when Joseph pointed upriver.

A mile away, on the opposite bank, it was as though a veil were being drawn across the forest. In the space of a minute a shadow had extended from the trees and across the river. At this distance, it looked like smoke on the water. Whilst we stood in sunlight, a mile away the light turned livid then ominously dark. We watched in fascination for a few minutes longer, until the river surface — consumed now in a pall of ragged cloud — was thrashed by rain. A storm had appeared, unsuspected and unseen, out of the north-east. It was travelling in a south-westerly direction. We lay in its path. Quickly throwing the gear and ourselves into the pirogue, we started the motor and ran before the advancing darkness. The first envoy of the storm, a cold, tearing wind, set us ripping at our bags for pullovers and waterproofs. We discovered that Martin had omitted to buy one of the latter on his pre-departure shopping spree. A campement was sighted in the wall of trees to our right; Joseph turned the boat towards it. A youth and several boys appeared at the top of a sheer rock bank. They beckoned us in. Joseph drove the pirogue into the midst of a number of others moored there. Crude yard-wide ladders, fashioned from forest timber, offered us a way up. We scaled them, carefully, and were greeted at the top with shy smiles and warm handshakes. We were led away towards a group of huts.

As we awaited the onset of the rain, the last of the light fled into the forest. Soon, the day had grown as dark as any day can do without becoming night. The youth brought us chairs. We questioned him about the fish traps we had seen piled on the bank beside the tops of the ladders. He led us out of the hut into the gloom, saying that the rain would hold off a while yet. We followed him to the edge of the high bank. There, he informed us that the large, roughly spherical baskets with two, opposing, entrance funnels were named *eketi*. The much smaller conical baskets were called *yika*. Eketi were set in the margins of the flooding river, during the wet season, when fish are on the move. (The fish prefer travelling the reedy and drift-wooded margins due to their easier currents and the safety offered by natural obstructions.) Although the baskets were five or six feet long and four feet high, I still found what he told us next hard to believe; that fish of ten and twenty kilos often pushed their way through a narrow funnel to become trapped inside.

The yika, in comparison, seemed pretty haphazard affairs: mere dunce's caps in basket weave, with an open base and a hole left in the point just large enough for an arm to be thrust inside. Yika fisherman wade the shallows, jabbing the base of the cone onto the riverbed, checking for the presence of a fish inside with a sweep of the hand. A few days before, Bill had caught a fish which surely strikes fear into the heart of yika fisherman — *Malapterurus*, the electric catfish. This fat German-

sausage of a creature emits 350 volts to stun its prey; even a small one can knock a person touching it if not unconscious, certainly off their feet.

The rain struck hard, and we ran for cover. Further questions were posed to the helpful young man about hook-and-line fishing for goliath: where, and how, and the best time of year. He told us that mbenga fishermen always fished at the side of the river, from a canoe, placing their baits close to the trees. He had obviously never considered the possibility of there being a good or a bad time at which to do this; fish were caught in all months, he said. Now was a good time. 'With a hook or with a net?' asked Martin. A net, he thought, was perhaps best now. We suspected as much: every one of the goliath on sale in the market had been a net-caught fish.

Outside, the rain flailed the yard. Formerly frisking goats, scratching chickens and loafing dogs now stood forlornly beneath dripping eaves. Smoke rose from the roof thatch of a hut opposite. *'La pluie, la pluie,'* the youth said mournfully, as he looked out at the rain. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled overhead; the rainy season had begun. After an hour, the rain moderated slightly, from torrential to downpour intensity. The tiny community began to stir. We went out, first inspecting an overgrown cocoa tree plantation in the forest behind, then spending more time with the basket traps, taking photographs of this centuries-old method of fishing. As we fired flashguns into the gloom, one of the boys directed our attention towards the river. A great raft of logs was passing in midstream, pushed by a sort of back-to-front tugboat. An arm waved mesmerically from the cabin. I have no recollection of us waving back.

At two-thirty, despite no let-up in the rain, Joseph announced that we must leave. He told us we were low on fuel and that paddling the first few miles downstream would be the wisest course. We did as he suggested, and were soon cold and wet through. Martin went a curious shade of grey. But we remained in good spirits: the day had not been wasted; the villagers had taught us a lot. After an hour, with exhaustion about to claim us all, Joseph started the motor and took us home.

* * *

Diary entry: 'This morning the sky is sparkling. High, thin wisps of cloud hang motionless in the clear air. The river surface is a well-polished mirror. Yesterday's storm seems a distant memory.'

We set off at six-thirty, with Armand, our second pinacier, at the helm. From the start, this likable teenager with a passion for all things mechanical insisted on discovering for himself what speed our fifteen-horsepower outboard was capable of. Soon we were racing downstream, engine ahowl. Ahead, a grey heron rose up on slow wings from the shallows. Behind us, wash chafed at a mile of shore. Extending an arm over the gunwale, I emphatically raised and lowered my hand; Armand throttled back. The pirogue slowed and settled in the water, emitting a final burst of waves. Then Armand announced that he knew a good spot; we were almost there.

A hundred yards away to our right a strip of sand lay at the forest edge. A rocky spur at the upper end of the beach set the current running diagonally out from the shore. An area of slack water lay between the eighty-yard-long line of current and the sand. This slack, we suspected, would be a haven for small fish. Goliath, as a creature of the current, would lie somewhere beneath the wrinkling surface crease formed where the flow abutted against the eddying slack. In places like these, a predator can keep an eye out for prey passing in the current, as well as launch surprise attacks into the milling shoals sheltering and feeding in the slack. We nodded in approval. Armand ran us slowly towards the rocks, cutting the motor in the last seconds to allow us to glide quietly in to shore with the flow. It was an impressive piece of boatmanship; he clearly knew his stuff. In the next hour, we strove to prove that we did ours.

Jeremy and I divided yesterday's eleven-inch tomba into equal portions, baited the great hook crimped onto the end of a yard-long leader of 66lb-test cabled wire, judged the flow to require three ounces of lead for our tackle to hold position on the riverbed beneath the crease, then cast out. Martin was handed one of the light rods and a tin of worms, and told to fish for bait. Armand, meanwhile, watched in fascination.

As we sat there waiting for goliath to scent and seize our baits, Martin hooked something. The fish announced its imminent appearance in a very odd manner, by letting out a series of honking noises while still under water that were audible from where we sat in a boat a few feet above. Martin duly swung in a small catfish. *Gurk gurk gurk*, it croaked affectionately. Armand declared it to be a *likoko*, then said, quickly, *'Attention, Monsieur Martin! Les piquants!'* He was pointing to a pair of widely spread pectoral fins, and insisting that Martin exercise great care when handling the fish. Jeremy and I also offered advice: we had caught rather too many similar-looking specimens in southern India. The front ray of this type of catfish's pectoral fin is of solid bone, a viciously barbed spike which extends and locks at right angles to the body when the fish is under attack and will, quite literally, stick in the throat of any predator trying to swallow it. This mere half-pounder had armaments an inch and a half long. In the next hour Martin caught a few more; Jeremy and I remained fishless.

The rest of the morning was spent trying more of Armand's fishing spots. There was a wooded shoreline below the head of an island, where a leisurely current ran smooth and firm and fifteen foot deep; next a beach, complete with diverted flow, back-eddying slack *and* sunken tree in the likely taking area; and finally — at lunch time — a wide expanse of sand, past which slid a deep, featureless, sandy-bottomed channel. Neither Jeremy nor I liked the look of this place, but agreed to fish it on account of the adjacent beach being an excellent spot at which to halt, rest and make tea. To our eyes, the open, brightly lit channel lacked the vital watery features — like shade and cover — that enable a predator to live by stealth and ambush.

Martin, meanwhile, had put together a sizable mixed bag of small fish. Armand

named them as they came in: *malangwa*, *soso*, *soso-drapeau* (or *le drapeau rouge*, the red flag — very apt, here), *liyanga*, *sardine* ... After a photograph, for recognition purposes, most were returned to the river.

With two lumps of fresh fish gore lying fifty yards out on the bed of the channel, the rods secure and the reel drags set and a cup of tea in hand, Jeremy and I reviewed the morning. We agreed that we had at last given ourselves sufficient time to do things properly; that Armand knew his stuff, and was fun besides; that the weather was behaving itself ('in fact, the sun's quite hot'); and that there were worse places to be than this. Things were going pretty well — all we needed now was goliath.

We made a last stand at the first place we had fished that morning. Jeremy and I sat with the heavy rods in the centre of the pirogue. Armand and Martin sat at either end, both fishing. I had handed Armand a rod when I had seen his rather envious looks as Martin swung in one fish after another. Soon they had quite a competition going; small fish flew past our ears with great regularity as each man strove to outdo the other in terms of number caught, size and species. The boat became quite rowdy, as good-humoured disputes broke out over who had caught the most tondi and the ownership of a now fast-diminishing supply of worms.

We had spent a somnolent half-hour beneath the glary afternoon sun when Martin said, quite calmly, 'Here it is — the big one.' I looked up from the incision my line was making in the smooth, silver-blue skin of the stream, to scrutinize Martin's rod-tip. There was no denying that something quite a bit heavier than the recent spate of quarter-pounders was chugging around at the end of the line. I looked across at Jeremy, and raised an eyebrow. We took it in turns to offer Martin advice on how to play whatever he had hooked. A few minutes later, after a slow, powerful fight, a three-pound fish wallowed weakly on the surface; between us we got it into the boat. The captor was the first to speak. 'Is it real?' he said. Or, that is what I think he said — I cannot be sure; I was groping for words myself.

If the mboga, back in Brazzaville, *looked* as if it had been buried for a fortnight and then disinterred, the fish before us now (another fully paid-up member of the living dead) actually *smelt* as if it had. This creature rode roughshod across all of Mr Darwin's compelling theory; its appearance denied even the possibility of evolution — someone or something *must* have made it. Yet, surely no divine being had a hand in this fish's making, however jaded and world-weary the hand's owner might have been at the end of a particularly creative working week. No, this animal had been assembled — haphazardly patched and thrown together — by a committee; a latter-day committee, on an annual works outing, whose members had been on the beer since the coach left early that morning. Armand called it *nzanda*. Zander? It was more *delirium tremens*. Poor creature — not only did we laugh at it loud and long, we also took its life. Afterwards, we marvelled at the snout for a mouth (pure Hieronymus Bosch), the little afterthought tail, its slimy green misshapen body.

Armand said nzanda made good eating, and took the unlikely thing home with him that night. We returned fishless.

We went to the market next morning, and did a little shopping. Having parted with the equivalent of one pound twenty sterling, we left with a severed head.

There were two *huge* goliath in the market that day, net-caught as ever, both devastating in their glittering maleficence. One we put at seventy pounds; the other could not have been less than ninety — it had a head which measured fourteen inches from the tip of the nose to the rear of the gill-flap. The lower jaw alone, from nose-tip to maxillary, ran a toothy six inches. After seeing them, Count Dracula would have spent a fitful day in the crypt, dreaming of new dentures. The *vendeuse* put a price of two pounds on each head. Ridiculous as it might seem now, this was unacceptable: we had a budget to consider. We bought the head of a mere forty-pounder instead, and carried it away for cleaning and preservation.

We had returned the outboard to its owner earlier that morning, for it was costing us ten pounds per day. What with the price of fuel, boat hire, boatmen, hotel room, food (never cheap here) and sundry items, we found that we had already spent in one month what we had anticipated spending in two. It was time to economize. Last night we had made a decision to confine our activities to within a short distance of the town, and get about by paddle-power. To economize further we would check out of the hotel soon, and camp beside the river. Tomorrow we would make a trial run and spend a night under canvas. Armand and Adolphe, a young man with a passion for all things photographic (especially our stock of film), would accompany us.

Sitting in the hotel garden, Jeremy and I treated the skull with salt and formaldehyde. A host of flies found the noxious fumes of the latter a mere tonic to their sinuses. The occasional passer-by, using the garden as a short-cut, stopped to watch the dissection of the fish's huge jaw muscle. One man, five foot tall and carrying a crossbow and darts, tarried longer. For several minutes he covetously eyed the fine lock-knife I was wielding. Then he flashed me a smile which displayed a row of sharply filed teeth. Momentarily disarmed, I smiled back. I had met my first pygmy.

* * *

Later we were to call it 'our night on the sands'.

We had said to Armand, 'We're going to camp on the beach we fished first the other day.' He'd nodded. In the late afternoon, we set off downstream. I sat in the prow, taking photographs, while the others stood and dug the water with paddles. As we passed a mostly flooded, grass-topped bar, Armand suggested I fish. I slung out a seven-inch shallow-running plug, and worked it across the current and slack at the tail of the sand. Nothing stirred.

*Prey to fuel shortages, mechanical bugs and shifting sandbars, a riverboat journey to the interior can take weeks*

It was late when we discovered that we had passed the beach a mile back. For reasons still unknown, we were bound for an expanse of sand that lay in the middle of the river some distance ahead. I snarled my displeasure; but, with darkness less than an hour away, this new destination was our only choice.

On arrival, before pitching camp, we swept the echo-sounder across the lake-like body of water that sprawled in front of the beach. We left Martin there, fishing. Soon it was all too apparent that the river for hundreds of yards around lacked any depth greater than three feet. My feeling of irritation turned at once to one of unreasoning anger. Armand and Adolphe, however, were entranced and delighted by the fish-finder, with its clever depiction of fish and multi-tone alarm to advise the user of their presence beneath the boat. The men's childlike wonder failed to mollify me.

We returned to shore. At the water's edge, we met Martin, rod bent, walking backwards up the beach, dragging whatever was attached to the end of his line slowly but surely after him. Martin looked at us, almost imploringly, and said, '*What is this?* Look - at - it!' Jeremy and I looked down at the fish, then quickly up at each another. Martin had done it again, he'd hooked a freak; but this one exceeded all expectations.

The fish — now aground in the shallows and bathed in torchlight — was about the size and shape of a small rugby ball. This had not been the case when we had seen it for the first time a minute earlier; since then the fish had inflated itself. From this impressive feat, we concluded that it was a puffer fish. In an instant, the fish's ridiculous green-and-yellow football-jersey coloration, parrot-beak mouth and heavy, peg-like teeth dissolved the tight knot of indignation I still carried within me. I

permitted myself a smile, and went to find a camera. The fish had regained something approaching original size by the time I returned. Armand reached down and tapped its flank with a forefinger; at his touch, the fish blew up again. Months later, I learned that *Tetraodon mbu*, the puffer fish of the Congo Basin, grows to a metre in length. Our specimen was rather less than a third of this size. A metre-long puffer, fully inflated, must be a memorable sight. *Tetraodon* eats hard-shelled molluscs; hence the teeth. After suffering the indignities of a photo call, the fish was returned.

With the darkness, white moths fell upon the sands, swirling like the fat snowflakes of a great blizzard sweeping a northern land somewhere in another world. The moths sought moisture, clammering in their hundreds to drink from the slimy, black interior of the pirogue; to suck at the dewy flysheets of tents; to seek the slickness of speaking lips; to test salty sweat on sunburnt faces before rejecting it. Close behind came the mosquitoes, announcing their arrival with a siren whine before picking at us with proboscides that slipped easily through multi-layered clothing to drink the warm blood that flowed beneath. A repellent-manufacturer would have applauded the unstinting liberality with which we now applied their preparation. The stove was lit and a pan of restorative coffee placed over the flame. Jeremy and I baited four lines with fish, cast out and secured the rods in rests clamped to the gunwale of the canoe. The graphite and dark-metal reels lightened into furry white as the moths gathered on them. As we watched this transformation, we heard Martin crudely, loudly and repeatedly advise the African night of his hatred of all mating mosquitoes.

We curried a fire-blackened side of smoked catfish for dinner, and ate it with rice. As we wolfed down the rank, oily flesh, moths supped the liquor on our plates, and mosquitoes fed from us. Air was not the only element oddly disturbed tonight. Water was too. The river shallows heaved with tiny fish; later, when we scraped our plates into their midst, they almost beached themselves in gratitude. Further out, the baits remained untouched.

As Armand and Adolphe busied themselves fishing (and draining our precious torch batteries), Jeremy, Martin and I sat and discussed the situation. We tried to approach things cheerfully, but, with the effects of the puffer fish morale-boost worn off, I soon found myself giving vent to dark and terrible anger. 'I sometimes wonder why I do this,' I said. 'It's pathetic. For years you flog round the world, trying to catch fish; depending on people who couldn't organize a piss-up in a brewery — nearly kill yourself in the process — then, when you've caught the bloody thing, you go home only to find that half the bastards there either don't believe you, or couldn't care a toss, or are spouting crap like "What d'ya wanna go *there* for? We've got enough of 'em over 'ere. Know what I mean?" Nudge nudge, wink wink — boom boom! I must be f——— crazy!'

Except for the whine of mosquitoes, the sands remained silent. Yet, I could see my friends' faces in the lamplight: Jeremy well knew what I was talking about, and

Martin, to a degree, also; but, being generally more restrained types, they could not always react in kind to my volatile, mongrel outbursts. But they knew, and they felt; we'd talked at length during those dark days in Brazzaville. Change presently faced the three of us, but the moments when we could talk about it did not always coincide.

I sat over the rods until one-fifteen. Above, from horizon to horizon, the sky was ablaze with stars. But they had no enlightenment on special offer tonight, so I went to bed instead — in search of oblivion.

Next morning, like a drinker who has overdone things, I tried to piece together what had happened in the early hours. I remembered Jeremy at the flap of my tent, thrusting seven pounds of ngolo catfish at me, saying that he had just caught it. (It is a little-known fact that fish weights cannot be erased from an angler's memory.) Then I remembered, partially, the disturbance that had attended the event which followed: an emphatic order in French, then a silence, followed by imaginative and very forceful use of the Anglo-Saxon. The day brought enlightenment. A fish? Yes. The noise? The pectoral spine of a six-inch catfish, a prospective bait, had stuck the tip of Jeremy's thumb to the depth of very nearly an inch. The French? Armand telling Jeremy to remove his other hand from the fish adhering to his thumb. The colourful language? Jeremy's response to Armand seizing the little fish by its body and ripping the deeply embedded, barbed spine straight out of his thumb.

After a breakfast with plenty of coffee, we paddled back.

* * *

A certain reluctance to challenge the river again, kept us in town for several days. Soon we were on waving terms with many of the inhabitants, and once the word was out that there were two English *professeurs* (Martin and Jeremy) staying at the hotel, we found ourselves receiving regular social calls from a number of the masters who taught at the local school.

One came to field-test his English; others to discuss current affairs; most to express affectionate despair at their country's politics; and all to complain they had not received a single franc in salary for the past two months. Though discontented, when asked whether they would be better off in Zaire, they rolled their eyes and pulled lugubrious faces. One said, *'C'est foutu!'* The past-tense equivalent of our own F-word. He assured us that life under the Congo's peculiar brand of Marxism — for all its faults — was preferable to one under Mobutu Sese Seko, the kleptomaniac dictator of Zaire who, with foreign backing, currently championed the cause of capitalism in this part of Africa. 'If you think *this* is bad,' he said, referring to local living conditions, 'then you should see Zaire!' We heard talk of the Congo adopting a multi-party, democratic style of government in the future, of the country's need for investment from the West. I sensed my inadequacy now, my own terrible apathy; realizing just how much I took boons like inexpensive medicine and education,

freedom of speech and modest affluence for granted — like so many in the West, who no longer value these things as rare and wonderful privileges but consider them a birthright.

* * *

The three of us paddled down to the first beach. The camp was up and ready for the night by four-fifteen. Then, having sectioned off the river with four lines, and added two more for luck, we sat drinking Zairean-grown tea in the last of the sun. We had escaped at last, left any unwanted items of baggage back at the Mission, and were digging in here for a session. We'd fish this spot hard and, in addition, make sorties to likely-looking places that lay within an hour's return paddling distance downstream. In this way, we would stand a good chance of finding goliath, or the fish us.

Viv Richards — or a man bearing an uncanny resemblance to the great cricketer — paddled past. We had seen him at work at the river's edge a few days earlier, wielding axe and adze with deft powerful strokes, to scoop out the heartwood of a former forest giant, to make a pirogue. Today, his formidable muscles scarcely flexed as he stroked the river surface with a paddle blade, on his way back to a campement upstream. 'Forget all that noble savage stuff,' Bill had said to us soon after arrival. 'Many of the river people die before the age of five, or, if they get past that hurdle, are dead soon after reaching forty. We've both seen incredibly healthy-looking people go in a matter of days.' I remembered his words now, as we greeted this fine physical specimen and received a cautious *mbote* in return.

Dinner, as usual, was a mish-mash of fish, rice and onions. Faced with twelve hours of darkness, we split the second half of the night into two-hour watches; one would keep a waking vigil as the others slept.

I woke Martin at three. 'All quiet,' I said, as he emerged from the tent, dousing himself in insect repellent, 'but you'll see lights on the water — a torch flash, or a lantern glow. They're out there fishing even now. Can you imagine what it must be like — without this stuff?' I gestured at the small plastic bottle in his hand. 'I'd rather not,' he said, and settled himself beneath the lamp and opened a book. I turned in.

I sank quickly into sleep, and was at once visited by a series of vivid, intricately patterned dreams. In the first, a light-filled eye gazed long into mine. Uneasy, I hit the picture-search.

I found myself in a room, sitting by a window, looking out at a landscape that was strange, almost fantastical, yet somehow familiar. A gently rippling lake spread wide and dark between me and a fat, red, low sun. On the far shore, in stark silhouette against a violet and carmine sky, lay the perfect cone of a volcano. Its feet were lapped by the waters; its knife-edged flanks swept down into a land corrugated by tump and hummock, drumlin and flat-topped glacial hill. My eye cut back to the

foreground, where an eider duck with young swam a path of ruby light that led towards the never quite setting sun. I knew this place; I had been here before.

In my dream, I had met someone in the room and was talking with her. There seemed so much I had say to this stranger, and the words came easily. Occasionally, when a lull fell upon the conversation, we would look out at the landscape: at the swirling clouds and at a sun which seemed uncertain now whether to sink a little further or commence its climb into a wide northern sky. A mere platitude, like 'It's wonderful!' would again begin the exchange, and soon we found that another hour of the night had slipped away. Finally, we wished each another the very best of luck, wrote addresses on scraps of paper torn from the back of a slim, rectangular book I had found in my jacket pocket, exchanged these slips and said goodbye.

I brought the warmth of that encounter with me into a third dream, almost a waking dream, dreamt in the half-night before the coming of the dawn.

I was walking a cliff path on the Welsh coast. It was early summer. The sun was high and bright, both sea and sky a very un-British blue, the air uncommonly clear and fresh; I could have been in the Aegean, in some earlier spring. Campion ran in pink fire along the cliffs; inland the pale green of new bracken growth swept in a broad wave, parting here and there to avoid small islands daubed mustard yellow and russet brown. Around each bend in the path, on every flat and upon the scissored turf within circles of lichen-crusted rocks, dozens of rabbits fed unconcernedly. I knew at once that I was not on the mainland, that I could only be on Skomer. I turned and struck inland, towards the ruined farmhouse, leaving the waddling puffins with their sand-eel moustaches, and the disputatious razorbills and guillemots nesting on the shit-streaked ledges of the cliffs for others coming after me. All I knew was that whatever I had to say or do, when I reached the old farm, was of vital importance. But I never got there: from somewhere outside the dream, a voice insisted that I wake up, open the tent flap and drink 'this possibly award-winning cup of tea.'

Across the river, the sun had heaved itself up over the rim of the world and was squatting atop the forest wall. Very soon, before my mug of tea was half drained, soft rays were filling a sky in which great clouds floated like crudely torn peaches in a jar of syrup. When I put the empty beaker down, the sands on which I placed it were flooded in light.

'*Voilà!* Quack-eur!' Martin said, pronouncing the second word like a duck call followed by an expression of gallic distaste — the local form of a brand name from my boyhood, still sold in the town market. I made a start on a bowl of porridge, individually recalling not less than a thousand others force-fed by a boarding-school twenty-five years earlier. With our bellies filled, we attended to the rods and found the lines hung in debris. We rewound with difficulty, stripping the lines of sundry stalks, rags and roots, then retied knots, rebaited, recast and sat down in the sun again, clutching mugs of strong coffee, to watch the wide stream slide past quick,

slick and silver-smooth. A pair of hornbill launched themselves from the high forest canopy, beat the air a handful of times with heavy wings, then proceeded to glide on an unsteady downward course for thirty yards before frantically flapping some more in an effort to regain altitude, repeating the exercise a dozen times before finally crashing into the trees on the other side of the river. I was quietly smiling at their aeronautical ineptitude, when I heard a roaring in the forest behind.

Twenty yards away, at the downstream end of the beach, a narrow track ran out of the forest. On this track, less than a minute later, appeared something large and yellow — prehistoric looking — with a huge claw held upraised in front of its body by powerful arms. It was a mechanical digger.

Belching black smoke, the machine rolled out of the forest onto the sand. The driver gaped at us in astonishment. Seconds later, from up the track, a large tipper-truck appeared. Its driver, once he had overcome his surprise, killed the engine, jumped out and came over to speak. Jeremy and Martin stood up to greet him; I remained seated, staring steadfastly at the river.

'They're here to dig sand before the river covers it,' Jeremy said to me a few minutes later. 'They want it for building in town. We can stay tonight, but they'll have dug as far as the tents by tomorrow afternoon. Then we must go.'

'Too bloody right we'll go! How about now!' I said, and looked back to the river, staring at it hard in murderous silence. The digger, meanwhile, ate sand twenty yards away. The morning air turned acrid with smoke and diesel fumes; Martin and Jeremy further sullied it with their imprecations.

I picked up a rod and a can of worms, and went down to the water's edge. Behind me, the scene had begun to resemble a set of workings on a Home Counties gravel pit. I was utterly downcast, reminded of one of the reasons I had left Britain for India a dozen years before: to escape the ever-growing crowds of anglers on once lonely waters and, more especially, to avoid this new breed of fisherman's often antisocial behaviour. But I would transcend this present horror, this dent in my dream, I told myself: I would fish through it, to the far side; it would not harm me. 'Go on — pull my line,' I said to the fish. Any fish would do — I didn't care how small it was; how ugly, smelly, inedible or misshapen; however third rate it might appear in the eyes of those back home who prided themselves on fishing only for the pot or, much worse (though never admitted to), for enhanced status or personal prestige. 'Just pull my line, and tow me out of here,' I said to an unknown quarry. A four-inch tondi obliged and skittered prettily across the slow-turning waters. My heart went out to it.

The therapy worked, my mood mended. My companions' moods had not. Martin wandered about, wild-eyed, distractedly picking up an item here, dropping it on the sand there. Jeremy *in extremis* sinks into a book and studies it with a vague diligence. He was poring over his notebook now, periodically looking up from it with sightless, weary eyes. I went over to my friends.

We sat together for several minutes, wordlessly watching the water, until someone

spoke. The words seemed to come out of the forest, or the air itself — certainly not from one of us. But above the piston hammer and axle squeal, we heard them clear enough: 'Of all the sandbars in all the rivers in all the world, we had to pick this one.' We looked at the digger and watched its bright yellow bucket wave erratically out of the pit it was making beside the tents. Tragedy became farce, and we were consumed by crazy laughter.

When the fit had passed, we offered our visitors a cup of tea. This earned Martin the offer of a lift into town, where he would make enquiries about a downward riverboat. We had talked things over and agreed that it was time to quit — to leave for the main river and continue our search there. We had done our best, we told ourselves; tried to succeed when we knew our efforts here were doomed to failure. We were merely victims of bad timing. It was time to move on, to try again elsewhere — this part of the story was over. I felt oddly calm, as if nothing really mattered any more.

Jeremy and I went and sat with the rods; Martin fished at the upper end of the beach, twenty yards down from the rocky spur. A canoe pulled in against the spur and from it a young man began to fish a handline. Soon, he was hand-over-handing small fish back into the pirogue. Seeing this, Martin applied himself to his fishing and managed a gurk-gurk or two in reply. A while later, the fisherman paddled over to the beach, cautiously greeted Martin and unshipped a rod from his canoe. Martin smiled, indicated to him that he should fish, and stepped aside. The three of us looked on.

The next minutes were a revelation and a delight. The young man plied the rod back and forth in the manner of a well-practised fly caster. If I had put my nine-foot Sage rod into this boy's hands, I am certain he would have soon been extending casts of ninety feet. Fascinated, we drew closer. It was not just his casting style (the mechanics of making a decorous cast can be soon learnt), it was the control with which he fished his tackle. His every movement was a model of economy; there was none of the hair-trigger tension from which I sometimes suffer, just an easy fluency married to a readiness to respond instantly to the take of a fish. Like Bola, Suban and Sundar in South India, he was a natural. (I have also encountered several similar on the hard-fished club waters of Wales — local fly-fishers of astonishing virtuosity.) Without having exchanged a word, I knew that here was a person from whom I could learn — one of angling's greatest rewards.

When his sport with the tondi slowed, he made to leave. We urged him to stay. While Jeremy engaged him in conversation, I took his rod — an eight-foot palm-frond stalk, soft and limber and bowed like a coach whip — and inspected the tackle. A fifteen-foot length of fine monofilament was fixed to the rod-tip. A slim, two-inch-long, hand-whittled, hardwood float — a perfect strike indicator — was neatly whip-knotted, top and bottom, to the line little more than a foot above a small (size 12) blued steel hook. The young man, whose name was Celestin, handed me a ball of white paste, identified it as kwanga (steamed manioc flour paste), and good

bait, then invited me to fish. I made an inelegant start, but managed to catch one close to the weedy margin where he had been fishing. With a smile, I admitted defeat and handed back the rod.

Then it was the young man's turn to inspect and assess. He eyed our rods, followed the lines to their watery terminus forty yards out, and nodded in approval. He asked if we had caught anything. We replied in the negative, informing him, by way of explanation, that we were after mbenga. He said he was surprised that we had not caught one, for this was a good spot. Just a little earlier, when he was fishing off the rocks, a mbenga had attacked a small fish he was retrieving. He showed us the fish: it had a large hole in the flank. I wound in one of the lines and showed him the terminal-tackle. *'C'est bon,'* he said. He liked the hook and trace especially. For bait he recommended pieces of cut fish, threaded onto the hook to form a tightly packed ball. He dismissed a suggestion that a small, whole or half fish might be as effective: mbenga, for some reason, prefer (or appear to be less suspicious of) ready-made convenience food. They feed only in daylight, he said; one hooked only catfish at night. Unprompted, he informed us that a margin-feeding mbenga can run itself aground — he had seen this happen several times. Finally, his intelligence on river levels and fishing seasons exactly echoed Bill's. Celestin went one better, though: 'Come back here when the river is low,' he said, 'and you'll catch plenty!' It was a comfort to know we had been doing things right.

We gave him line, a couple of big hooks and a length of wire when he left. Single-handed he had put us back on the rails. The lower level of the main river was our best chance now. Martin immediately left for town.

The sands were already splashed in shadow when he returned. We took afternoon tea and heard his news: the boat would not depart for at least twelve days; it was at present two days' journey downstream; and, when it did arrive, still had to travel for several days further upriver before turning round and coming down. It could be three weeks before we found a stretch in all the hundreds of miles of the Congo River that was worth fishing. Further polite conversation at the tea party was terminated.

I considered our plight. We could not fly south to Brazzaville and then begin our journey back north by river: time and budget would not allow it. Nor could we bear the cost of maintaining a hotel-room base in the capital, as we attempted to prise fish from the hard-pressed local waters. In the terrible silence that followed, I dallied with the idea of calling a halt — of suggesting that we fly to Brazzaville and board the first plane home.

'Oh — I almost forgot,' said Martin minutes later. 'I met a real motley crew at the port. They're taking a log raft down to Brazzaville. Remember the one we saw during the storm? Like that. Guided by a *micropousseur*, a sort of motorised pusher as opposed to a puller. One of the crew — a nice young man named Ferdinand — offered us a lift. I said we'd let him know.'

'You will,' said Jeremy. 'First thing tomorrow morning. That raft is not leaving without us!'

'Well said, Huck Finn,' I drawled.

Whilst we had been speaking, the sun had lowered itself gently upon the world. Across the river, the ramparts of the forest blazed in amber, silver, green and gold. Then, as if a switch had been thrown, the sands about us were drowned in darkness. We made preparations for the night.

As the two brothers bickered amiably about who was to cook the meal, I started a letter. Since penning a few attenuated messages in Brazzaville — postcards to my mother, to Anita and her husband, and to a close friend who had nearly come with me on the trip — I had written nothing except sketchy impressions in a travel diary. Now, I felt a strong need to communicate with someone. I found the graph-paper exercise book I had bought weeks earlier (the only form of stationery, it appeared, that was available in the Congo), settled myself beneath the hurricane lamp and began to write.

The opening paragraphs set the scene: people and place, the river, the pan of catfish bouillon, flavoured with garlic, onions, peanuts, purée and *piment* chillies, steaming away on the stove a few yards from where I sat — lots of local colour. Then I described goliath, portraying the creature in almost mythic light. I was rather pleased with one or two of my touches of style — they would not only interest but also entertain the letter's recipient. A call to dinner interrupted the self-conscious literary effort.

I went to bed early, at eight, to catch a little sleep before commencing a two-hour watch at eleven-thirty. I read through the unfinished letter before turning out the light.

It seemed only minutes before Jeremy woke me. When he had gone, I sat beneath the lamp and listened to the night. Frogs and crickets sawed industriously in the forest. A fisherman passed by, unseen; only the dip of a paddle and the faint hiss of water against a canoe hull warned me of his approach. Looking up, I watched the sky crackle with stars. Looking down, I watched a thousand hopeful words dance desperately across a page. In an instant, I knew. It was all so horribly clear: that there was no one to whom I could send this letter; that there would be no warm hug and glad smile awaiting me when I got home; nor was there any place now that I could really call home. By coming here, I had burned my boats, basked briefly in their hopeful blaze; then, as the embers died, found myself alone with the darkness. I chain-smoked through the rest of the watch, then woke Martin.

I performed the pre-sleep ritual of slaughtering any mosquito that dared to whine within the sagging confines of the tent; then, having undressed with great difficulty and slapped a last coat of repellent onto arms, face and neck, lay back to await oblivion. Fifteen minutes passed, and I was almost gone when nature called to me with a grim insistence: the coffee would have its revenge. Cursing, I got dressed and

stumbled out into the night. 'Sleep well?' said Martin snidely as I emerged, grumbling about my need. Ignoring him I limped ten paces inland, to the forest edge, and relieved myself. As I did so, something set fire to my legs.

The torch beam revealed the cause: ants — tens of thousands of them; big ants — over half an inch long; worse still, army ants — the scourge of all living things in the tropics, including man. They poured out of the forest, now, in a thick, wide, jostling black stream. A few dozen of their number, in the van, finding an object blocking their path, had run up my trouser legs and, on discovering flesh, were scalding me with their acid bite. A message was being sent down the line, to the others behind: 'Get in here fast, poison and immobilize! Then we can break the creature up and carry it home in bite-sized chunks!' Army ants — I had read of them — million-strong hordes of rampaging scrap dealers who sting first, dismantle second, and eat you later. Their reputation was evil, the tales about them scarcely believable. But, as the pain now playing across the soft flesh of my upper thigh was only fractionally less than excruciating, I had no intention of sticking around merely to disprove old wives' tales. I ran for the river.

Never have I torn off a pair of trousers faster. (I was standing in the pirogue floating a foot or two from the shore.) Martin looked on. Frantically brushing and slapping at my crotch, I ordered him to get his brother. Martin's face was a study in confusion. 'Ants!' I cried in explanation. 'Thousands of them — coming out of the forest. Army ants. Mean bastards. Get Jeremy out of bed!' Martin stood there, paralysed. I hoisted my trousers and ran back up the beach. Martin followed me to the trees, bent down, looked, then raised himself stiffly. He set off across the beach, his movements now like those of a string puppet trying to run.

'Jeremy?' he said to the tent flap.

'Uhh.'

'We've got ants. I think you should get up.'

Another groan from the tent interior.

'I think you should get up. We've got ants.'

A further groan.

'Jeremy! I really think you should get up — NOW!'

A fumbling and mumbling came from inside the tent. A zip was drawn and a face appeared.

'Look!' shrieked Martin, pointing.

Jeremy looked. Ants were already welling around the groundsheet sill, probing its seams with their forelegs, sniffing for food. I stamped on a dozen before Jeremy dragged himself out. Jeremy, who — like me — is good for virtually nothing except a spell of silence soon after waking, stood beside the tent, looking vacantly round and about. Then, suddenly animated, he vigorously applied himself to reproducing the steps of a long-lost dance — the sort of treading routine one sees in Hollywood westerns made in the days when Native Americans were still called Injuns. The ants had got him.

'The food!' bellowed Jeremy. Practical to the last, he ran off to find the box of provisions. I grabbed one of the church hall chairs Bill had lent us and stood it in the shallows. Jeremy placed the food upon it. We retired with lamp, torches and insect repellent to our offshore retreat, Martin casting anxious glances over his shoulder as we went.

In the next hour we witnessed a massacre. A dark tide swept down the beach, driving before it all living things, falling upon them at the water's edge, clustering in seething, biting profusion upon a large grey sand-spider before breaking it up. As one line of attackers came down, another made its way up, carrying the spoils of the hunt home, back to the forest. Martin shuddered in fascinated revulsion. Jeremy and I lifted a number of the spiders that were cowering among the miniature dunes at the water's edge and offered them sanctuary with us in the boat. Martin's jaw had adopted a set; his eyes narrowed into slits of anger; he nervously smoked a cigarette. 'Bastards!' he muttered. 'What bastards!' Watching the ruthless infantry at work, we drenched ourselves in repellent to repulse a simultaneous, all-out aerial attack by a squadron of mosquitoes.

'Right! I've had enough of this,' said Martin suddenly, and stepped out of the boat. For several minutes previously, he had been tormenting a few of the more entrepreneurial ants — those that had climbed the mooring-rope and boarded the boat — with a pump-action repellent spray. The effect that Deet (di-ethyl-something-very-long-and-boring), the major constituent of any self-respecting insect repellent, had upon the ants appeared to be much the same as the one their own poison has upon any creature they sting: pure agony. Martin strode up to the front of the advancing column and half emptied the spray cannister. He strafed the line of the retreating column next, circled about, then dived onto any still-looting pods yet to rejoin the throng. In minutes the beach head was secured. Thousands of wounded ants remained, but the rest had upped and gone. Martin's face now bore a look of wild, grim satisfaction.

'Martin,' I said. 'Please tell me. Is there any truth in the rumour that you don't like ants?'

He gave me a look. It was a troubled look, one full of sadness.

By the time we were ready for bed, I found that it was again my turn to take a watch. I thought some more about the letter as I sat there on the battlefield, before waking Jeremy who would keep a vigil until the dawn.

I awoke unrefreshed. Outside, upon the sands, ants still writhed in oases of agony. Far upriver, to the north, cloud stacked itself in preparation for a storm. The digger and truck arrived to begin a second day. I crawled back into the tent. Jeremy appeared with a cup of tea, took one look at me, and withdrew. I lay there: listening to the remorseless *takk-takk* of the diesel engines rebound off the trees behind; reliving the past year, seeing in it only lost opportunities, sadness, partings and regret: hurting.

An hour later, I made another start on the letter. Soon, I was lying through my teeth, writing a piece for public consumption, making the whole venture sound like a thrilling away match — all goals and no fouls. I have the letter before me now. It reads like a spirited account of some late-Victorian jaunt — one of those never-to-be-admitted and peculiarly English disasters in which heroic Carruthers lost a leg to a lion, staunch Smithers fell into the clutches of cannibals, and poor Ponsonby, his reason gone, took to eating the leach gaiters and, at the end, the spare canoe — the stuff of history books from my youth. On even the most cursory inspection, the evidence contained in the letter is undisputable: I was in a mess.

The first tent came down, bare seconds before it was taken by the pit. I was up by this time (late morning), draining the dregs from a pot of coffee, watching the river a mile off mist over and the thin cloud above us being gradually whipped and thickened by a wind that surely preceeded rain. When we saw the upper reach begin to steam and pucker, I laid a sheaf of rods in the pirogue, Jeremy the rucksacks, Martin himself and whatever remained. Then we set off in silence for the town an hour by paddle away.

We stayed close to the bank, and had gone only a few hundred yards when the leading edge of the storm hit us. The river became a corridor of wind-whipped waves, the forest nearby a roaring perimeter wall. We moved in close, low branches attempting to spear us through the plastic sheet beneath which we cowered. I could feel the buckshot blast of rain — through the sheet, through my clothing — drill against my back. Dinky collapsible umbrellas were put up to help counter the assault. In a few minutes the rain abated and we continued, cursing initially then lapsing into foul-minded silence. The storm raged on downriver. We had missed the worst.

But the rain pulled a flanker and drove at us again. We hove to. Outside, viewed through the orange filter of the plastic covering, everything went dark. Martin meticulously bailed the fast-filling canoe with an empty milk-powder tin. We had laughed, weeks before, on buying a can of CELIA brand milk-powder for the first time; Celia being the name of Martin's twin sister, a woman who, I think, had sometimes envied her brother's travels. I wished we were with her then, at home in Cheltenham.

When the last, dark, dangling tresses of stormcloud had moved off south, we emerged, covered the mound of already sodden baggage with plastic, and paddled on through the still-heavy rain. Despite having marvelled, several months earlier, at multiple hues of green, I could only shudder now at so many shades of grey. From every direction, it seemed, an iron sky strove to press our rumpled, ill-washed world, and, wherever we went, we were in its way. Upriver, the quay and rain-streaked walls of the port appeared through the murk. With great difficulty we reached the cargo ramp at the upper end of the quay, just before the weather launched a murderous last attack.

I remained there, under the tarpaulin, when the rain stopped, having dismissed

my friends with an abrupt wave of the hand as they left in search of the *chef du port*; to seek his permission to take shelter. Then, as I contemplated the wood grain of the canoe interior, I found that my breath would come only in a series of racking sobs. My companions found me later, more composed now, splashing my face with river water. 'We can camp here,' Martin said. In silence, I walked past him, up the steep slope to the port.

* * *

The next thirty-six hours were forfeit to the ghosts of the past and the pitiless spectre of the present. At the end, sitting there, tea in hand, amidst a scatter of drying clothes and equipment, I realized that I had fled into the future — Africa and goliath — without having first taken leave of the past. I had elected to cut and run, rather than confront and accept the realities of the past: to my cost. We will all, at some time, experience that blinding light on the road to Damascus and — even the most thick-skinned and self-serving — meet our fate at Waterloo. My numbers had just happened to come up in exceptional circumstances, far from home. I sat now, watching the silver-blue immensity of the river slide past in the sun: a homicidal tree, at the water's edge, bombed passing paddlers with its hard-stoned fruit; fishermen chatted as they set nets at the tail of an island downstream; Jeremy sparred with Martin over the issue that manioc flour would cheaply bulk out the morning porridge; I found myself grinning. The present and future again held interesting possibilites.

They were coming to get us at dawn. I lay there, watching the new light turn electric blue as it came through the flysheet. Outside, roosters assailed one another with strident rhetoric. From downriver came a drone, which had become an insistent roar by the time Martin was up and shouting: 'It's them! Come on! Ferdinand said they won't wait!' I stood up and tore my tent from the ground; then, once outside, rolled it up — pegs and all — and thrust it into a bag. As I dressed, a squat vessel hitched itself to one of three log rafts riding the margins above the quay. Soon, figures were running towards us across the quay, grabbing at our baggage, taking anything that was portable. I hadn't seen such a neat pick-up since Brazzaville. Jeremy counted the bags. Satisfied, we threw ourselves aboard.

With repeated roars from its marine diesel engine, the micropousseur wheeled the raft out into the current. Before we really knew where we were and what we were doing, we had set off down the great river.

**Chapter Fourteen**

# With the Current

Paul Boote

It does not seem good to be always going with the current.
There is more satisfaction in squaring one's back, and fighting against it, and winning one's way forward ...

Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889)

The essence of enjoyable angling, to the experienced fisherman, is the challenge of problems.

Eric Horsfall Turner, *Angler's Cavalcade* (1966)

Soon we were travelling down the tawny stream at trotting pace. Half a mile ahead, downriver, an expanse of glassy-smooth water was being scratched and riven by a second log raft and its churning propulsion unit. The two rafts, we had been told, would proceed in convoy to Brazzaville eight days' distant, travelling by day, mooring up at the river's edge at night. We would be with them for at least the first five days — the time it took to reach Mossaka, a settlement beside the River Congo, south of the equator. As a commercial fishing centre and field headquarters of the department responsible for the country's inland fisheries, the place had prospects.

From the flat roof of the engine compartment that lay in front of the wheelhouse cabin situated at the stern of the vessel, we surveyed our new home. Behind us, the captain — a man whom Martin had not encountered during his dealings with the crew a few days earlier — stood with his bare belly bulging against a near-metre-wide wheel, staring with sore-looking eyes at the reach ahead. During the frantic embarkation period, the crew had put our baggage up on the roof. Then, the roof — five generous paces long by fractionally more than two wide — had appeared a safe, convenient place to stow gear whilst the four-man crew cast off mooring-cables and lashed the rear of the great raft to the square-ended prow of the micropousseur. Now, it seemed that the roof — a mere early-morning arm stretch away from the booming diesel engine below — was to be our living and sleeping quarters. But, as we hadn't given any thought as to just how we were going to sleep on lines of logs, we were happy to accept the offer.

It was a beautiful day. The heat, already boiling by eight o'clock, was simply infernal by nine. The river ran in a strip of light metallic blue between converging lines of purple-green forest. Above, the sky followed in an orderly band of much

deeper blue; clear and cloudless till it reached the forest edge, where it became flak-shot — filled with bursting clouds stacking themselves, in luminous white, stark black and suburban grey, to form a mighty wall on either side of the river. This gorge through the clouds was a phenomenon we noted now for the first time, and were to see often in the future. Martin set up the stove and made tea for eight. The four crew, friendly men in their twenties, were keen to chat with him about Paris and the world outside the Congo. Martin, relaxed, courteous and amusing in any social group, did much to promote the *entente cordiale.*

We passed the heat of the day by various means. I explored the raft, establishing its length, eighty-two paces, and width, nineteen — twenty if I had cared to walk another foot and take a swim. It was constructed from 175 ten-metre logs with an average diameter of over a metre; a few were very much thicker. They were lashed together with steel cable passed through iron rings secured to the timber by hammer-driven pegs. On the body and sawn end of each log was a painted stencil, detailing both its individual and consignment number. Cut in the northern forests, the logs were bound for Brazzaville, from which they would travel by rail to Pointe Noire on the coast and thence by ship to Europe, to become hardwood furniture and veneers. I remembered then Conrad's much quoted words from *Heart of Darkness*, the words that presently graced the front page of my travel diary: 'Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.' In the Congo today, I reflected sadly, though vegetation still riots and many big trees are kings, an increasing number of the latter are being deposed and transported and given new jobs as coffee tables. The Amazon today, the forests of the Congo basin tomorrow....

But we were glad to be aboard any vessel, however environmentally unsound. At last we were travelling to meet our adversary; every mile brought us closer. In addition, on the open river, there was so much to see. For the first time since arriving in Africa, I was able to observe my surroundings with the set of eyes I had been given, years before, by India: the wide, wondering eyes of a child, coupled with the interpretive, reasoning skills of an adult. I sat now upon the foot-polished sheet-iron foredeck, with my back against the throbbing, upper front wall of the crew's tiny below-decks bunkroom, watching the ever-changing scene.

On the logs, three goats — bought up-country and bound for a bloody end in Brazzaville — panted under the fierce sun. The crew had thrown them fodder ripped from the riverbank on departure. The goats slurped awkwardly from the water that lapped between the logs on which they precariously knelt. The crew meanwhile lazed in the shade, or bathed in a rectangular hole in the timber near the front of the raft, where a couple of logs had slipped their cables, become submerged, and formed a perfect, but risky, swimming pool. We were to use the pool frequently in the days to come.

The sight of pirogues peeling off from a bankside campement prompted an immediate response from the crew. As a canoe neared the raft, Ferdinand and a tall,

lithe young man named Joseph would be there waiting to greet it, to take a rope or length of liana creeper, tie it to a convenient cable-ring and secure the slender craft. The pirogues bore food for sale: a freshly shot monkey; fried, dried, smoked and fresh fish; a trussed hen; bananas, plantains, papayas and maize: fruits of the forest, the river and the jungle clearing. If a pirogue looked particularly well stocked, Ferdinand would look over to the wheelhouse. Soon the captain would be down at the water's edge, leaving Félix, his assistant, steering on the bridge. Later, Ferdinand instructed a vendor to take a stringer of *machoiron* catfish up to the captain for inspection. The man returned to his canoe, coins clinking in hand, minus the fish. In the space of two hours, we watched quite a store being laid in. We bought a couple of thirst-quenching papaya fruit, having enough dry provisions to last a few days yet.

On another occasion, as six pirogues were leaving, a single canoe shadowed the raft uncertainly at a distance of about fifty yards. It was paddled by a very attractive young woman; with her was a much younger girl — probably a sister. Seeing the beauty, Ferdinand and Joseph made rapid ground across the logs, beckoning to the woman to come over. She had little for sale, but the two men engaged her in meaningful conversation for several minutes. I watched the whipcord Joseph place a hand on the young woman's forearm. She shrugged it off and deftly pushed away from our moving shore, to paddle back to her life in a hut on the edge of the forest. The two men, noticeably crestfallen, watched her go, then, on seeing a group of women standing on the bank sixty yards away, became animated once more. Joseph wriggled his pelvis in Presley-like suggestion, Ferdinand brandished a maize cob with similar intent. The women melted quickly into the trees.

In the mid-afternoon, when the sun had lost its bite, we were sat on the cabin roof, drinking tea and writing up our journals. I was just beginning to feel nicely at ease with the world, when Félix's head appeared over the edge of the roof and talked to me. I groped for a meaning to the words, until I saw a finger point at a two-metre-long calibrated steel bar which lay on the roof, mostly hidden beneath one of our rod tubes. I moved the offending tube. He pointed next to a short length of metal pipe protruding vertically from the roof, just behind the rucksack against which I was leaning. I heaved myself and the item out of the way. As he thumped at a crude wooden plug in the threaded pipe-mouth with the heel of his palm, he explained to Martin that he was checking the fuel level in the tank below. He took a sounding with the measuring rod, withdrew it, inspected the diesel-wetted end, showed it to Ferdinand who was standing nearby and, with a frown, muttered something to him. Martin asked Ferdinand if anything was amiss, and received a *'Mais non'* in reassurance. We went back to our tea.

At four-fifteen, the note of the engine dropped an octave, and the raft slowed. At the front of the raft, Ferdinand picked at knots in an unruly pile of cable, while Félix, Joseph and Jean-Pierre, a vacationing college student on board as cook, intently scanned the right bank of the river. At the stern, the captain watched proceedings through slumbrous, heavy-lidded eyes. When a scatter of huts appeared

*A brace of hefty kamba. A specimen encountered later was to make these appear insignificant*

on the bank ahead, Félix raised an arm to his boss on the bridge, who at once steered out towards the centre of the river. Before it could slip past the campement, the ungainly craft was wheeled in a great circle, turned towards the shore and made to face the current. As its top left-hand corner drew level with a big tree on the bank a raft's length upstream of the huts, Ferdinand and Joseph leapt ashore with a cable and secured it to the bole of the tree, while the captain held the raft stationary in the brisk, bankside flow. When given an emphatic hand-chop signal by Joseph, he killed the engine, and our floating football pitch drifted gently in to rest against the bushes at the side.

With their labours done for the day, the crew set to work on the night. Jean-Pierre lit the diesel-filled kerosene stove in the crew's quarters; soon it was smoking away beneath a pan full of fish and brown river-water. Ferdinand and Joseph hailed the occupants of the campement and summoned them to bring sugarcane and kwanga for the meal. Even the captain (whose name, we had discovered, was Gregoire) had come down from the bridge, and was standing on the foredeck, his fleshy face creased in smiles. He, too, was addressing the people on the bank, wisecracking to them in Lingala, and slapping his thighs in mirth. Minutes earlier he had seemed bored and withdrawn, now he was a different man.

We made our own cooking arrangements; then, in the falling dusk, rigged two mosquito nets and half a tent across the cabin roof. The result was nothing less than a masterpiece of improvisational art: an example of the British ability to make do and mend, and a poignant reminder to me of why, in the past, having been encouraged by leaders to make a vice of this virtue, we had won wars and Empire but ultimately lost ourselves. I found that I had chosen the section of roof which sported the fuel filler-pipe; it lay now within the confines of my net, its fuming mouth inches from the spot upon which I would lay a clothes-roll and rest my head. I grinned and bore it.

As the afterglow drained from the sky, I sat beneath my net, reviewing the day. It had been one of our better ones. Minutes earlier, a freighter had passed by at speed; twin spotlamps slicing the darkness, seeking buoys and bank markers, ahead and astern; bound for the beer and the bars of the capital, four days' non-stop running downriver. We could, just possibly, have been on that boat, but it didn't matter now; we were on the move, in pleasant company, and with space to ourselves — unlike the passengers crammed onto the barges pushed by the freighter. What, after all, was a modest degree of discomfort, a negligible risk of rain or a slower pace, in comparison with an opportunity to travel down the Congo on a log raft? — something which few, if any, non-Africans have done since colonial days.

Sleep would not come at first. The crew, all ears to a radio, were singing along to tunes of the moment, then, as the palm wine bought in from the campement took effect, dancing in mincing steps upon the tiny foredeck and swaying along the gunwale walkways a few feet below our heads. They were having a party. We were dog-tired. I remember nine o'clock (the dew dampening my net, the lazy air's inability to waft diesel fumes away, the constellation known as the Southern Cross skewed at an angle in the big sky), but not nine-thirty: the lonely night had taken me to her bosom.

* * *

Within an hour of a five o'clock start, the forested prows of a fleet of islands hove into view downriver. The stream was very wide now, the air clear and cool, and the light a tasteful gold. Unassisted, images burned themselves onto the emulsion of memory — so deeply, I was to find, that when I mentioned the same early morning to Martin several months later, eager and unprompted he projected it back at me, perfect in every detail.

Gregoire, *le capi* of micropousseur number 40 (the figures were writ large, in black, upon the white outside wall of his two-bunk cabin to the rear of the wheelhouse), looked ill this morning — paunchy, jaded and hollow-eyed, a mere shadow of last night's party's life and soul. He attempted a smile in gratitude when Martin offered him a mug of tea but, judging from the expression that followed, instantly regretted it.

The second day passed in virtual duplicate of the first: the sun beat down, pirogues came to trade, goats wilted, and the crew lazed; we read, wrote, swam, and looked about.

Later, when one reach of river seemed indistinguishable from the next, it was to Gregoire we turned for interest. He was intriguing. Stood there motionless on the bridge, eyes trained straight ahead like a Zen master, on seeing a group of huts he would become suddenly animated. He would turn from the wheel, step to the open side-door, raise his arms above his head, and salute the people on the bank with a slow, splay-armed, almost Biblical wave. Without exception, on these occasions, his face bore a kindly smile.

The fuel was measured again, and its level pronounced low. Ferdinand informed Martin that number 40 would now have to stop at Mossaka to refuel, and that a seven-day wait might be necessary until new supplies arrived.

* * *

Day three began with a blow that set waves breaking over the front of the raft. A cool wind drove us from our bedding, to pack things away and cover them with plastic. The weather, then, cleared quickly from the south.

After breakfast the crew unravelled the net that had fouled the propellor when mooring by a village the previous night. Despite frantic yells of warning from both the crew and a dozen fishermen on shore, Gregoire had failed to notice the net-floats bobbing in the shallows and had run through them. Money changed hands, in compensation. By nine the following morning the square-ended prow and forward capstans of number 40 were draped in lengths of shredded net drying in a lately arrived sun. Small pieces of net, as Jean-Pierre showed us, made excellent pan-scourers and, at a pinch, bath-flannels. The vessel had plenty of both, now.

Despite the early morning hiccup, the weather seemed to be becoming hotter and more settled with every hour we made south. Jeremy's thermometer recorded a shade temperature of 36 degrees Celsius at lunchtime; the water went 29 degrees, and looked clearer. Jeremy, eager for answers, devised a system for measuring visibility, and was soon lowering a white disc (the cap of our water filter) on a length of cord into the river, and recording the depth at which the cap disappeared. Ferdinand talked of yellow water here, and black water further down. We keenly awaited the latter.

The day ended with another fuel-measuring ceremony: the level was now critical; we could break down at any second. Opinion among the crew was divided as to what exactly we should do. One faction advocated chasing the second raft and its attendant micropousseur, number 51; it had departed only minutes before us on the first morning. Another suggested we creep downriver a distance yet, moor at a campement, then await a passing boat from which we could scrounge fuel. Gregoire listened on, impassively. By the end of the evening (another party), a decision had

been made to chase the raft ahead. That night, just before turning in, I wrote in my diary: 'Incredible that they didn't take on a bit more fuel at the start!'

* * *

Next morning the engine roared into life at ten to five. I watched one of our saucepans begin a slow journey across the vibrating roof. Jeremy grunted from within his tent. Martin, lying a net's thickness from me, stirred and, without opening his eyes, said, 'Tell me this isn't happening.' I couldn't oblige, but instead told him it was his birthday.

Day four immediately set out to prove day three's weather forecast wrong. At six o'clock, a swatch of cloud ripped by a southerly wind deposited rain. The crew unrolled dark-green oilcloth drapes to cover the metal-mesh side walls of the engine compartment, then, having tied them down, retired to their cabin; we secured a plastic sheet over our baggage, and joined them. In the time it took us to make and consume five pints of tea, the squall had blown over and number 51 could be seen less than a mile ahead.

We gave chase beneath a dark sky. We sat in the subterranean fore-cabin, in an atmosphere made filthy by the crew's stove and boiled-fish breakfast, listening to the stiff oilcloth flap against the outside walls, the throb of the engine, the clatter of the iron sheet that separated us from it, and the tinny music coming down the airwaves from distant Kinshasa.

At twelve-thirty we were informed the fuel had gone, and that we would have to stop. We moored amidst a host of fish — *kongowasika* fish, we were told — rolling, unconcerned by the raft's and the engine's presence, upon a now sunlit river surface. The crew secured the raft, then cast off. Gregoire at once turned the vessel and headed off downriver at speed. He had gone only 400 yards when the crew's loud remonstrations stopped him. The raft, Joseph (an employee of the logging company) said, could not be left unguarded: it would be stripped of its cables before an hour had passed, and the logs left to float downriver. The men of the campement a short distance downstream of the raft must be vested with its safekeeping. We turned back.

We caught up with number 51 at two o'clock. Both crews cheered as number 40 drew level and attached itself to the starboard side of the raft, ten yards forward of number 51. Soon, men were slapping hands in greeting and squealing with delight. Together, the crews walked up to the front of the raft and lazed there in chatty good humour. A holiday atmosphere prevailed.

Number 51 was a very different establishment from our own. Its captain, a small, active, wiry man had a wife, ten-year-old son and baby boy on board. The *barreur* (helmsman/mate) was also accompanied by his wife and child. A third woman — to whom, as far as I could see, no man laid claim — further reinforced the feminine presence. In comparison to our spartan, all-male regime, number 51 was a haven of

comfort and hive of industry: the vessel being fairly stuffed with food; the captain forever sluicing down surfaces with water and wiping them with a cloth as we went along. Meanwhile, Gregoire stood by, face agleam in smiles, chatting to the unattached lady.

An uneventful hour and a half's steaming took us to the town the crew had been talking about since departure. Leaving the raft at its upstream edge, the micropousseurs came in two-thirds of the way down a 200-yard length of low-lying shore hatched with timber-frame and mud-walled huts. A Navy gunboat rode the shallows seventy yards below. All along the shoreline, pirogues were moored, or coming, or going; and men, women and children washed themselves or their clothes and kitchen utensils. A little back from the shore, behind the front line of huts, weaver birds twittered about gourd-like nests suspended from the fanned branches of great raffia palms. The evening sun did much to enhance the beauty of this large village.

After an early supper, Jeremy and Martin took our passports to be inspected and stamped by what proved to be a very drunk and extremely erratic local official. I remained on the cabin roof with the bags, watching people watch me, noting also that tonight the crew's end-of-the-day wash-and-brush-up was a particularly thorough one. Joseph, a bit of a sharp dresser and all-round style consultant at any time, had really dressed to kill. Ferdinand, having repossessed his bar of soap, washed fastidiously then slipped on a clean T-shirt bearing the motto 'New York Sailing Club'. One by one the crew slipped ashore, for a night on the town.

* * *

Day five, the day we should have reached Mossaka, began with a row. We were woken at six by an angry exchange between the two captains. 'Where were you at five?' the captain of number 51 was saying. 'Last night, I said *five!*' Gregoire mumbled an answer. The smaller man squared his shoulders, moved his face close to the other's, and let out a disgusted *'Pah!'* Ferdinand stuck his head over the roof and explained that the two boats had agreed to leave at five to collect our logs from upstream, but Gregoire had been 'detained' in town and had only just arrived. The skipper of number 51 was now threatening to stay in port all morning. We left at six-thirty.

On the way upstream, Jeremy and I began the Mossaka debate. As more information on river levels and wet and dry seasons, north and south of the equator, had come in from the crew (and, just last night, from a couple of villagers), the more we had grown confused. Jeremy argued that, as Mossaka, on the main river, lay within the cuvette (the bowl or basin), into which the Congo's northern tributaries poured, river levels there (despite the town remaining rainless for another six to eight weeks) would be high, and fishing prospects consequently poor. He went on to argue that, as the river we were travelling was rising fast and its waters adding

daily to those of the cuvette (and that other, similar tributaries were almost certainly doing the same), we should travel further down, to below Mossaka, to the *couloir* (the corridor) — the gap in the southern table-lands through which the waters of the basin drain and are conducted to the great Malebo (formerly Stanley) Pool above Brazzaville. The narrow couloir, despite its considerable depth and swiftness of flow, causes the river to back up (like water exiting from a still-running bath) in the bowl above; Mossaka, now, would be in the midst of waters waiting to escape. I agreed with Jeremy, but maintained that we should not completely pass Mossaka by, for had not the crew told us there were many more mbenga to be seen in the market there than in the town we had left a few days earlier? We must check out the place first, then, once absolutely certain we had missed nothing, move on. Besides, Mossaka was a major terminus at which we could quickly join a downward boat. Jeremy nodded his head. Martin had listened on in silence.

Number 51 pushed us back to our raft, took up position at the rear of the logs, lashed itself to them, then pushed the whole assembly back downriver. Throughout, number 40's engine remained dormant. Jeremy and I, accustomed to comparable if not similar farces in India, meditated upon books and the scenery; Martin became increasingly restless.

At twelve-thirty the town was sighted a few miles downriver. The crews, sprawled on the logs at the front of the raft, turned to the wheelhouse, in smiles. Fifteen minutes later, when a great white ship rounded a bend in the river downstream of the town, the men leapt to their feet and cheered and danced. 'It's the *Impfondo*!' Ferdinand cried, *'La Ville d'Impfondo!'* She was the lifeline number 40 was waiting for; she had fuel, lots of it.

By three-thirty, we were alongside the docked *Impfondo*, by the engine room on the lower deck, pumping 2,600 litres of diesel from her tanks. Gregoire looked radiant; the crew were not unhappy either, with a night's revelling in prospect; but we were downcast. Yesterday, on finding the town empty of food — milk powder, luncheon meat, sugar and other staples — we had been told the riverboat would have them all. It did not. It had a few, but at such inflated prices we felt it more prudent to wait another day and buy them more cheaply in the stores we were now promised in Mossaka.

We took it in turns to explore the *Impfondo*. Though the riverboat had lost its cargo of passengers to the town, and would remain unoccupied till it set off downriver in two days' time, activity both on and about the vessel was nothing short of frantic. The pirogues we had seen coming ashore the previous evening, laden with metre-long billets of split wood, were now tethered to the sides of six great iron barges lashed to the ship's bows. Here they were greeted by a group of formidable-looking women, commerçantes busy setting up oil-barrel fish-smokers. With the top removed, a hole cut in the wall just above the base for the insertion of a smouldering log, and horizontal metal grills fitted halfway up and near the mouth, these barrels were to transform the lower rear-deck of the boat and its attendant craft

into a floating fish-processing plant within the space of an hour. When the wood was stacked (on barge decks and in boat gangways and aisles), the fish came in, small ones mostly and not a goliath among them.

We waited for sleep beneath the glare of the ship's lights. The generator powering them chattered to itself in the engine room a few yards away. Promenading locals craned their necks to look at then pass quiet comment on the three Russians or Americans — never Britons — sleeping in box-like nets and marvellous little tent upon a cabin roof. I was soon gone.

* * *

Rain blew in from the north shortly after dawn, set in, and delayed departure another day. We sat disconsolately under cover, on top of the hatches that covered the hold, opposite the door of the ship's freezer-room, watching the bounty of river and forest come — gurking and grunting in fast-expiring life, or rigid and flopping in grisly death — seeking storage for the voyage down to the capital. We saw a fifty-pound ngolo catfish (East Africa's *vundu*) arrive slaty-backed, blunt-headed and bloodied. Into the freezer it went. Next a *carpe*, in reality a giant *Labeo*, fifty pounds if an ounce and reminiscent of the fish of home. This drew a crowd, for it was a big one. Into the freezer it went. And finally there came an old friend, a mboga, so ugly as not to invite even my sympathy. The carpe changed hands for 11,000 CFA, twenty-two pounds sterling. At sale, in Brazzaville, the fish would more than quadruple the merchant's outlay.

Jeremy was feeling weak and groggy this morning. As we had taken a lot of sun the previous day, I suggested he drink plenty of well-sweetened tea to rehydrate. To each mugful he also added salt, and by lunchtime had rallied.

We would leave tomorrow — day seven — weather permitting. But so too did the *Impfondo*. For a time, we discussed jumping ship and joining it. Being a much faster vessel than ours, it would reach Mossaka before us — but at a price. Although no figure had been agreed, we knew our raft journey would be cheap ... and Ferdinand and Joseph were good fun.... We opted to stay.

Late in the afternoon, we left the riverboat and moored by the logs. The crew preened themselves for a final night in port. We cheered ourselves up with a dinner of luncheon meat hash and rice. Martin chose a moment in the post-prandial aura to remind us that food stocks were running low.

* * *

With sleep-creased faces the crew stumbled out of their cabin at five o'clock in the dawn. They were ready to go. But where was Gregoire?

At some time after six, he appeared with two young women, a baby and a modest array of household items in tow. As he stepped up to the wheel, the women

installed themselves in the rear cabin. At six-thirty we were off.

For twenty minutes we made good speed downriver. We were glad of the warm sun and windless air of this newly reformed day. A big pirogue made its way towards us from the left bank; there were eight men on board, four were paddling. Number 40 slowed to allow them to tie up on its port side. As they were doing so, a second pirogue drew in to starboard. Motor-driven and wide-beamed, it was a typical trader's vessel. Its occupants came aboard, had words with a worried-looking Ferdinand, then left, making a cash offer for my wristwatch as they went. The first pirogue had remained where it was, awaiting the other's departure. When it had gone, the four non-paddlers boarded number 40. Gregoire came down from the bridge to greet them on the foredeck. One of them, a man in his late twenties, tall and powerfully built in a corpulent sort of way, with light-coffee as opposed to ebony-black skin, a wispy beard and very long, meticulously manicured fingernails, shoved a bottle into Gregoire's hand and, with a curling smile, bade him drink. Gregoire drank deeply. It was African whisky, distilled from palm sap, sugarcane or fruit; we could smell it from where we sat fifteen feet away. Gregoire's face adopted a dreamy-looking smile.

Gregoire said something to Félix at the wheel behind us; Félix angled his head in acquiescence and understanding. I noticed that Ferdinand, Joseph and Jean-Pierre were now sitting together at the front of the raft, casting occasional glances in the direction of the pousseur as they talked.

Within a few minutes a handpump had appeared, its hose inserted into the filler-pipe against which I had lately slept and fuel was being pumped into one of two 200-litre barrels that stood with the four men in the pirogue. Félix had been ordered to crank the pump-handle. Progress was slow. Gregoire, fast-emptying bottle in hand, muttered something to him; the handpump was abandoned. Soon a hose appeared from the engine compartment, gushing diesel pumped under power. When the first barrel was full, the hose was transferred to the other. Till now the three of us had sat looking on, with interest but without comment. This situation altered when we saw the contents of the first barrel being tipped directly into the bottom of the pirogue. 'I don't believe it,' said Martin through ventriloquist's lips. 'They're going to fill the bloody thing!' The contents of the second barrel joined those of the first.

The four men in the pirogue became nervous, and seemed anxious to get away. They shot frequent looks back upriver. A few words from Monsieur Nails saw them cast off and paddle quickly towards the near shore. Nails and the others remained with us. A minute later, 300 yards astern, the tall bridge of the *Impfondo* appeared, blazing bone-white in the sun.

The riverboat rapidly overtook us. As it passed, Gregoire hailed the bridge with his two-armed salute. (The empty bottle by this time was back with its owner.) A sea of hands on the now seething decks waved good-humouredly in return. When the *Impfondo* was well downstream, the pirogue cut across from the shore and rejoined us. Defuelling recommenced in earnest. We buried our heads in books, having no

desire to tangle with these customers. One of Nails's lieutenants, a young man whose insolence was made the more disturbing by his angelic good looks, was unable to take his eyes from our luggage. He questioned Félix, who could tell him nothing about us, except that we were not Belgians. Again my dime-store watch induced persistent offers; I feigned incomprehension.

If the brains now languishing on our decks were unsavoury, the diesel-splashed brawn presently stood in the pirogue was downright dangerous. One of the men, surely the subject of a case study soon to appear in a new *psychopathia*, was terrifying. As a physical specimen he was near-perfect: clad only in a pair of nylon running shorts, his well-developed musculature was undeniable and only too apparent. However, it was above the shoulders that things went horribly wrong. First there were the engorged, ever-twitching neck muscles, then the double-splayed, multiply broken, fighter's nose; and last, but by no means least, the eyes. Independently from one another, occasionally together, those eyes bulged menacingly, shifted erratically, rolled rapaciously.... Never had I seen such eyes. There was something feral — totally wild — about the man. Even now, I think that I would rather meet a tiger, face to face, than spend time alone with him.

They left us, three hours later, taking with them 1500 litres of diesel and a roll of cable pilfered from the forward locker. As we breathed sighs onto blocks of unread text, a frowning Ferdinand joined us. Martin greeted him with a raised eyebrow, and received a *'Zairois! Oh! — la-la!'* in high falsetto by return. We learned that we had been paid a visit by Zairean river rats — freebooters up the tributary from the confluence with the Congo. I remarked, flippantly, that goliath seemed almost herbivorous in comparison. We laughed. Then Jeremy reminded me of what the Canadian had said. 'And will we reach Mossaka with the remaining fuel?' asked Martin. Ferdinand smiled sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders.

I sat counting islands in the stream. The river was vast now. For ten minutes we would cruise down an eighty-yard-wide wooded channel, reminiscent of some exotic reach of middle Thames, when the bank to our left would suddenly taper off and end, and we would be left staring at a half-mile of shimmering blue. A further five minutes would see the right bank disappear and another half-mile of bright water take its place. The water had lost its yellowish tinge, and was turning blue-black. Jeremy announced a two-inch improvement in visibility. We were nearing the Congo.

We decided we had reached it when the water ahead sprawled three miles wide between heat-hazed banks. The spectacle drew us out of ourselves; simultaneously, we broke the silence that had prevailed since the canoe's departure. I picked up my camera, wrung the zoom lens for some seconds, then put it back down. To try to photograph the immensity of water and sky before me now was a futile exercise: an attempt to give it a border, to contain it. No lens could capture such space and

solitude, or convey their effect upon the imagination. No, this had to remain an interior landscape.

The day passed without further incident. Two families had joined us, having gained permission from Gregoire to tie up and hitch a ride to a settlement, where they would sell their present cargo. It lay there, now, upon an wide log; a pile of large, paired, snowshoe-like basketwork frames sandwiching carefully arranged selections of small, smoke-darkened fish. The women lit a fire on an adjacent log, stripping off sections of its bark for fuel; the men put out wooden chairs and stools; one of them, an older man, dandled a grandchild on his knee whilst his wife and daughter cooked the midday meal; the party had very quickly made itself at home.

For dinner we ate a stew made from catfish, a handful of peanuts and our last three onions. It was followed by black coffee; the milk powder had run out a couple of days earlier. Our last two, tiny tins of *lait sucré* (concentrated milk), we had decided, should be held in reserve for a real emergency or a special treat. We turned in at a farcical six-thirty. Staring up at the fizzing night-sky, I longed for bananas, a bellyful of porridge and a decent cup of tea. Out of the silence came Jeremy's voice: it exactly echoed my longings.

'Still, Mossaka tomorrow,' chirped Martin.

* * *

Breakfast comprised stale bread (bought three days earlier on the riverboat, where it had been proudly, and honestly, sold as 'bread fresh-baked in Mossaka this morning') and tinned sardines. Even now, I can hardly bring myself to describe lunch, but I must. Lunch was to have been garlic fried rice with sardines, but we had only two cloves of garlic.... Jeremy had a brainwave, and produced garlic capsules from the medical kit. We fried the rice with the contents of three of them. In terms of sheer awfulness the resulting meal very nearly rivalled the all-time culinary low, a decaying-monkey stew, we had briefly mouthed a few weeks earlier.

That day — day eight, I believe — really took its toll. As we dawdled down the river, we continued the Mossaka debate. Though clearer, the water was still high: Mossaka, increasingly, looked a poor prospect. Jeremy suggested bypassing it, and going straight down to the couloir. 'With this lot?' I asked aggressively. 'At the present rate, it could take another ten days! Let's get off at Mossaka, do some serious troughing, get some rest, take a quick look around, then get another boat.' And so it was agreed.

After lunch, Ferdinand came over to tell us we would not reach Mossaka today; we would be there by midday tomorrow. He promised a stop tonight, though, at a town where we could buy provisions.

The town, I will call it that, had a few pieces of fried fish and three small onions. We took them back to the boat, walking along the unmetalled river-road, past a

petrol station. A Land Rover waited at one of the pumps. It had been there some time: its tyres were flat.

• • •

At nine-fifteen the next morning, after an early start, we were running at good speed 250 yards out from the right bank, when number 51 — two raft-lengths below — cut in suddenly towards the shore. Ignoring the manoeuvre, Gregoire continued straight ahead. It was only an almighty yell from the crew, and Félix's frantic gesturing at a signboard on the bank, that made him change course. Too late. Within seconds a slow shuddering sensation informed us that we had run aground.

For a full five minutes the micropousseur's engine roared at full speed astern. The logs, grounded on a newly submerged sandbar, would not shift. Number 40 was unlashed from the rear of the raft and driven round to the front, where it was made to push and shove at the grounded section from every possible angle. We sat on the cabin roof, clutching at baggage with one hand and any secure fixture or fitting with the other, and endured twenty minutes of violent buffeting. When it ceased the raft was still firmly grounded, in thigh-deep water, 250 yards from the shore.

After a lengthy and by no means happy discussion, the crew agreed there was no alternative but to dismantle the raft. Learning of this, the remaining family of hitch-hikers loaded its pirogue, bade the men a shy farewell and paddled off downriver. When they had gone, demolition work began in earnest. As Ferdinand placed a sledgehammer head upon the upper surface of a log directly beneath a steel cable, Joseph swung at it with a wood axe. Gregoire looked on, dolefully, from behind the redundant wheel.

Through the day, the raft was slowly broken up: lengthways, into three sections. Two were pushed to shore and tied up; the third, the offending section, was cut into three- or four-log strips before being towed back, a strip at a time. We stayed on board, safe from the day-flying mosquitoes — non-malarial mottled brown jobs, each like a little March Brown trout fly — waiting on shore, ready to drink your blood and leave an itchy wound.

Our interest evaporated faster than Gregoire's fuel; boredom filled the hours and minutes that shuffled past in double-slow time. Unable to keep up the pretence of reading a minute longer, Jeremy joined the crew on the logs. I snapped with a camera. Martin reclined in tangible silence or raged in bouts of torrid muttering; a look from him would have dropped a buffalo.

At day's end, we were moored beneath the trees, beside the shattered raft. A single log — an unrepentant sinker — remained out on the bar.

'And what shall we have for dinner tonight?' said Martin. 'I quite fancy the fish. How about you, Paul?'

'Good idea. A little poached salmon perhaps, with new potatoes, a nice salad and

lashings of mayonnaise. Nothing too fancy, Martin.'

Jeremy, normally quick to participate in such fantasies and even keener to know what was for dinner, had remained silent. I looked at him. He was staring vaguely at the river. 'All right?' I said.

'Odd taste in my mouth,' he replied. 'Thick head too. Feeling cold one day, hot the next. The sun?'

'More like malnutrition,' I said lightly. He gave me a pale smile.

The occupants of a nearby campement had invited the boat's company for an evening drink. We were on the guest list.

A plank was laid from the prow onto the soft clay at the river's edge. We walked a slippery course down it, my progress not assisted by a bag heavy with cameras. The campement lay above us, on the riverbank, an easy fifteen feet above the present water level. Bent-wood stools, a future 'must' for collectors of 'ethnic' crafts, awaited us in a sandy clearing at the river-side edge of two small huts. A fire glowed by the entrance to one of them; several women and children sat around it. Their husbands and fathers sat with the crew, pouring palm wine into plastic mugs and chatting. To smiling nods from the men and a pithy comment from an older woman to her younger sisters off-stage left, we joined the party.

We accepted a polite half-mugful of the sweet, cloudy, still-fermenting liquid. Snacks arrived — pieces of charcoal-grilled fish. Breaking through the dark crust of one, I found firm, white flesh beneath. Martin and I ate ours readily; Jeremy picked at his.

The conversation between the campement and the crew was made accessible by the occasional use of French. It was soon apparent that, to these river people, Ferdinand and the rest seemed glamorous *voyageurs* — modern-day musketeers with a girl in every port, a family back home in the city and prospects of a freedom they had never known. As for us, we must have seemed like creatures from another planet. Before us now were people who, by mere accident of birth, had been weighed down with the rigours of existence, denied all but a few possibilities, and cast upon the waste heap of human potential. This realization disturbed me; I discreetly signalled a move.

Walking up the steeply inclined plank to the foredeck, I slipped and fell. Had I not been burdened with cameras, I would have dived and taken a soaking; instead, I lunged for a capstan and fell heavily onto the welded edge where deck met hull. When breath had returned, stars cleared, and the sharp pain in my side dulled, I crawled forward onto the deck. 'Are you all right?' said Martin.

'A little too early to tell,' I winced in reply.

* * *

By dawn, I knew I had cracked a couple of ribs in my right side. Through the night

every breath had been a stabbing; every movement something to be considered first and weighed against its consequences. Though broken ribs may be rank outsiders in the human damage stakes, I found them trying. Someone has since told me (and he has broken much) that, for him, legs are better things to break: you get the pain over and done with, at the start. In this field, at least, I willingly bow to another's knowledge.

We lay in till seven-thirty. Since first light the crew had been on the logs. I listened to the click of a ratchet-winch tightening cable, before eventually struggling to my feet to record the scene with a camera: a mess of nets and tent on the roof, a much greater one of logs and men behind.

At nine, with the raft reassembled, we collected the last log. It was secured with cable to a forward capstan, then dragged off the bar and pushed over to the slot the crew had made for it in the raft's starboard side. The log was almost in position when Gregoire gunned the engine and tried to ram it into place; the impact nearly threw us overboard. With a great *Krakk!* the cable whipped back and struck the bows, making them ring. The log sank in twenty feet of water. Joseph was led away by the others.

We left at ten-fifteen, twenty-seven hours after running aground.

Over coffee, with tinned milk, we talked.

'Well, what can befall us today?' I said.

'I'm going for running out of fuel,' said Jeremy.

'Me too,' said Martin, with a look of such ridiculous solemnity it set me sniggering, until a pair of killjoy ribs demanded that I stop.

'Well, call me a fool,' I said, 'but I'm putting money on engine failure or mechanical breakdown.'

'Foolish boy,' said Martin.

'One more on a ship of them,' said an unsmiling Jeremy.

An hour later a raftless number 51, travelling fast and pushing a wall of water before it, appeared from downriver: it had come to save us. Within minutes the crews had retired to the front of the raft. I dared not imagine what Joseph was saying now, so I buried myself in Negley Farson's classic, *Caucasian Journey*; for me, another person's travels seemed a safer bet.

A further hour saw us in the reach above Mossaka. The river now was an apprentice ocean, four miles wide, and destined, we were told, to broaden by another three below the town. On the banks the forest had thinned to a sea of wind-brushed reed flagged with tree skeletons. A flotilla of pirogues stretched nets across pretty lagoons formed by hundreds of grassy islets. The sun shone. I returned to my book. Martin went off to chat with Ferdinand. I was gazing at the snows of mighty Elbruz in the Caucasus when he returned, looking brighter and more animated than he had in days.

'Well, we were all wrong. Guess what?' he said excitedly.

'What? Martin,' said Jeremy in his exasperated-older-brother voice.

*'We're sinking!* Captain Pugwash has really done it — there's a fountain gushing from the floor in the crew's cabin — he split the hull when he rammed that log!' At this, Martin let out a high cackle.

Jeremy snorted. My stomach began to churn. 'Oh! Ah! — Oh *don't!'* I gasped. 'It's agony. *Don't make me laugh!'* Jeremy leapt up and went below. I got there a minute later. I saw Ferdinand fighting with a jet of water; it kept hitting him in the face. From opposing bunks, Joseph and Jean-Pierre looked impotently on. Quietly, gently, I withdrew and returned to the roof. There, I closed my eyes and tried to think of Russia.

Bananas appeared; Jeremy's appetite was back today; we gorged on them.

We gazed at Mossaka for an hour before reaching it. A radio mast, a newly constructed jetty, a few buildings in concrete and brick (the first for ten days), a shoreline busy with boats and bathers — to us it was Paris.

* * *

We spent the night moored near the crumbling brickwork of a dry dock built in colonial days. A pair of once fine buildings of similar vintage lay nearby on the riverbank. We were at the upstream edge of town, in a creek formed by the Likouala tributary as it ran, clear and dark like milkless tea, out of the western forests to join the main river. Looking across the creek to the reeds and the great cloud-splashed sky beyond, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in Norfolk, on the Broads, at the turn of the century, before the cruisers came. Number 51 lay beside us, its barbecues fragrant with toasting monkey and crocodile. Martin was fishing. Since I had discovered the mokobe hotspot off the stern the previous evening, Jeremy and I had been unable to part him from a rod. Picture mokobe as a dace-roach-tigerfish hybrid and you have him; a small, fast, obliging fish not averse to taking to the air. I currently held the rod-caught Congolese record of thirteen inches; Martin sought to beat it.

Though the town was quite well stocked with food, its fish market held little of interest. Ngolo the size of pigs were present, but tigerfish — with the exception of a few tomba — were absent. The lady at Onapec, the fishery organization, had sat among ready-made gill nets and boxes of Kirby-bend hooks and told us that mbenga were taken only in the spring, in the period of low water, with nets — never hooks. As we walked back to the boat, I quizzed Martin on just what she had meant by spring: their southern spring or our northern one? He had not asked her to name months, he said.

Jeremy and I now had a new riddle to solve. Less than a fortnight before, our tributary had been freely surrendering goliath to nets during a period of high, rising

*Self-timer shot for the archives at Mossaka: Paul suffering two cracked ribs, Jeremy five days into suspected malaria, Martin on the verge of nervous breakdown ...*

water. Yet here, in similar conditions, two hundred miles further south, there was not a goliath to be seen. Did goliath run up the tributaries to spawn, I asked, like mahseer? Were the Congo's fish up the tributaries? Or was high water in the Congo too heavy for successful net fishing? I doubted the latter possibility: there were more nets in use in the Mossaka reach than in any we had seen, and small-fish catches were plentiful. We agreed that our tributary now seemed a very special place — in low water particularly, when, as Celestin had said, many mbenga are taken on hook and line. But that was months from now, and we would be long-since gone. In this season of rising levels, the couloir remained our best bet.

Jeremy, suspecting that his bouts of fever were occurring at forty-eight-hour intervals and malaria to be the cause, took a syringe needle from the medical kit, and went to the hospital for a blood test. Martin continued fishing. I lay about feeling useless. To me, now, the river debate seemed irrelevant, the idea of fishing preposterous. I went over to Martin.

'I can see what you see in this, now, Paul,' he said.

'You can?'

'Yes, I can. I still think fishermen, mostly, are miserable sods — life's fiddlers, train-spotters in waders and waxed jackets — but I have to say I like their vice!' I laughed. 'This is great,' he continued. 'For the first time in weeks, I'm away from

fools, filthy food and aggravation.'

'For me it's different,' I said. 'It was fishing that brought me here, and fishing that got us into this.'

'Ahh — but you take it so seriously.' He swung in another mokobe. 'When I can no longer see straight I look away from the viewfinder.'

'Meaning that I should from mine?'

'It's worth considering,' he said.

Late in the afternoon, we moved our bags onto the veranda of a deserted shop that lay beside one of the decaying French residences.

We had made our escape.

* * *

I woke with a high temperature and sore side; Jeremy had had another bad night; Martin was quiet.

The two brothers left for the hospital and the riverboat port.

The result of Jeremy's blood test was negative. He doubted its accuracy.

At the port, they had met the captain of a freighter, a German who had sailed many of the world's great rivers and decided that a tour on the Congo would be a fitting end to his career. He retired in a few months, and planned to buy a yacht and sail it round the world. His second-in-command, a striking Frenchman in his late thirties, born in the Congo, had fished for goliath and taken a few big ones. When questioned about locations, he named a fifty-kilometre stretch we had passed through nine days before. 'Look for what the Congolese call *ngobila*, the turning waters,' he had said.

The freighter would not take us: the captain ran a tight ship and never carried passengers. There was, however, another boat — the *Sangha* — expected at any time. By evening, with the help of a kindly local official and the redoubtable Ferdinand, we were aboard.

We rigged our paraphernalia on the deck of the barge immediately ahead of the *Sangha*'s square-ended prow, fast realizing number 40 really had been a *micro*pousseur. Earlier we had watched a slightly bigger version push a line of passenger barges (the complete assembly being known as a *coche*) up the Likouala. Now we found ourselves on a pousseur the size of a small ship.

By nightfall, I was all-in. I got Martin to wind and knot ten yards of bandage tightly around my chest, then dosed myself with paracetamol. This quickly afforded some relief. After a porridge blow-out we turned in.

* * *

Before dawn, heavy rain saturated us and our possessions. I would have been put out if I had not been feeling so much better.

*... and one for the folks back home. Having a great time, wish you were here*

Martin and I retired beneath the plastic sheet; Jeremy ducked through a hatch into the hold. When the rain stopped, and Jeremy had not appeared, we went to look for him. A glance was enough: he had an awful pallor.

We left mid-morning under leaden skies. The *Sangha* was a water-borne hearse on which the forest was being carried to its grave; every barge was piled with timber. When the sky cleared, Martin and I began sunning the gear. Jeremy, incapable of anything now, lay dozing on the deck, beneath an umbrella. Martin's eyes were set hard in worried calculation. The senior and junior captains watched proceedings with interest from the bridge.

To me, now, the Congo had become a monster. I felt certain that it had never run in panic through the hills. It reminded me of a type in my youth — the old fogey — who aped his father's views, wore a sports jacket, hated modern music, and read literature of such mind-shrivelling dullness that, to escape from it, Queen Victoria herself would have tried the *Kama Sutra*. This river had never had fun, never enjoyed an unguarded, intimate moment.

And, as with the river, so with the place. For me, India had been (and still is) a torrent, a whirlpool of the senses and the emotions that one can enter exhausted and leave invigorated and renewed. In comparison, Central Africa was a sump, a supremely indifferent pit, draining you of energy and subverting every good intention. I found it daunting that a landscape could induce such emotional aridity in

the midst of so much natural abundance. I had reached the end of the line, and, looking at my companions, knew that they had too.

At five the river tried to win me back by dressing up in colours: first appearing in a sash of garish red-gold from the west, then slinking about in muted shades of lilac, silver and warm grey. I was unmoved.

Jeremy could not eat the evening meal. As we slept, the boat steamed on through the night; the beams of its spotlamps raking the distant shore.

* * *

The boat stopped at four-thirty. A cockerel told me we were by a village. I lay listening to the thrum of faster water against the hull. The eastern sky was brightening above a bank of hills, the first for weeks. The river was narrower, and clearer too: the couloir could not be far ahead.

Under way again, we watched the river run ahead through veils of mist. At nine-fifteen with the switchbacking shadowy hills to the east and west kept from one another by just a mile of water, we passed a village, noting that it merited a name and ink dot on our map. By eleven we were dozing, having learned we would reach our destination by mid-afternoon. Again I turned to my friends: Jeremy looked sallow and emaciated; Martin, though of slighter build, was pitifully thin. As for me, while a face mirror could tell me nothing, two ribs and a throbbing head had ideas of their own.

At midday Jeremy and Martin were bent over their rucksacks, packing.

'Well, are we going to continue?' I said. 'I think we should talk. For myself, there's a part of me desperate to carry on — we're almost there I think — and another, saying, "Look around you." Then I see me unable to lift my pack, Jeremy totally done in, and Martin impersonating a holocaust victim ... three cripples.' My message was heard in silence. I began to dismantle the rods, snipping off the wire traces and winding them into neat coils around bunched fingers. When I looked up, I found that I was alone.

They returned a few minutes later.

'Shall we go straight on?' Jeremy said quietly to me. 'To Brazzaville?'

'I think it would be for the best,' I said. 'We've done everything we can. We can return next year — to the right place, at the right time, and really *crucify* them. There is no disgrace.' We looked at each other.

'Right, that's settled then,' said Martin. 'Time for tea. You make it, and I'll go and see the captain.' He was off across the deck.

A look of amusement entered Jeremy's haunted eyes. I clutched at my ribs.

When Martin returned, having told one of the captains about our change of plan and received his consent, we drank the tea. Though the light was flat and lifeless, and the river sulky at having to squeeze past firewood-raided hills thick with smoke,

our spirits lifted and sparks of humour kindled communication once more. I felt a sense of great relief. Home seemed a cheering prospect now — even thoughts about the new start to be made there were no longer painful. The act of letting go had helped enormously; Africa's mirror — the same one in which the continent demanded many of its early visitors regard themselves — had done the rest.

Before closing the tackle bag we allowed the Eagle sounder a final sweep. In the centre of the now half-mile-wide river it recorded depths of between twenty-three and sixty feet; given more time I'm certain it would have found a hundred. Then, as the others rested, I took photographs of this notorious reach, remembering Bill's words about its whirlpools, which, he had heard, still took the occasional large vessel. A serious river, indeed.

We stopped at two-thirty. On shore, fifty women carrying bowls of dried manioc root awaited us. We went forward to enquire about bread. The town was a 200-yard length of hut and loose masonry. A cold wind eddied waywardly beneath a dark sky. A few fat raindrops fell. The captain came up and bought bottles of Primus beer, then seeing us turned to Martin and snarled, *'Sortez!'* Go! Martin gave him a quizzical smile, and received the same monosyllabic order by return. Then the captain was walking back to the bridge; and Martin was after him, explaining that he had seen the other captain earlier and received his permission to continue to Brazzaville. The tall coarse-featured man turned, said that if we didn't get off his ship immediately he would throw us off, and was gone. Martin and Jeremy followed him up to the bridge; I remained on deck. Martin's spell in Paris had equipped him well: five minutes later he came down again, delivering insults over his shoulder that would have stopped traffic in the Champs Elysées. Ten minutes later I was sat on a pile of bags on the riverbank; Jeremy and Martin had gone off to look for somewhere to stay.

We were 200 kilometres from Brazzaville and not happy, Martin especially. A dirt road led out of town. Twice a week, trucks used it to reach a paved highway to the capital. We were in luck, a truck left early next morning. We squatted in the worst hotel yet, remarkable only for the size of the amphibious spiders in its toilets. Opening a tin of tomato purée (bought at a suspiciously low price some weeks before), Martin sprayed an outside wall to the height of ten feet with the gory contents. Jeremy was feeling feverish again, and could not eat. We indulged his desire for liquid by visiting a bar. Orangeade went down to the accompaniment of a wailing Bob Marley. On a bed at last I nearly had a good night's sleep, but Jeremy woke me on returning from an early-morning walk. He was not wearing a stitch of clothing; he told me this was the only way he could get cool.

* * *

As we left the hotel the next morning, it seemed as if the whole town was moving

sacks of manioc in wheelbarrows along rutted lanes. We followed the sacks and soon arrived in a sandy square lined with palm trees and well-perforated brick-dwellings on three sides and the river on the fourth. Though the sun shone, none of us felt bright.

Two trucks would leave just as soon as they had each taken sixty fifty-kilo sacks of manioc and the fish that were being brought up from the river. Jeremy sat on the sand, strength gone after lugging both my rucksack and his own; Martin made enquiries about tickets; I took a camera to the fish.

I was gone a few minutes. On my return an unshaven bleary-eyed Jeremy muttered something about goliath, and waved me in the direction of a newly formed crowd. I found Martin wielding a compact camera in the thick of it. Then I saw the fish, and became very excited. Goliath all right: a short 54 inches in length but of massive depth and girth — 120 pounds certainly, possibly more. Martin told me the man who had brought it in had told him they caught bigger ones. The fish lay, battered and bloodied, in an enamel bowl; it deserved better. Bill's words intruded again: his second-hand (and, I had thought, apocryphal) story of the Malebo Pool Monster. One of Brazzaville's long-standing foreign residents had told him of the legend of a fish weighing over 100 kilos, an ancient ironclad with teeth gnawed down to carious stumps and jaws festooned with lost hooks and traces: the River Congo's Moby Dick. I could believe it now, just as we were going home....

The manioc and fish went into the back of the truck, the human cargo (forty-eight souls) was left to find ways of attaching itself to a bare tarpaulin-cage. Jeremy found a canyon among the bags and bodies in which he could lie flat. Martin and I sat on our packs, saying we would take them with us when we fell off. We left at ten, and were soon climbing the valley-side. On reaching a steep, deeply rutted section of road, the truck stopped for everyone to disembark and walk on until the going improved. The country was beautiful. I even took photographs. The river looked fabulous — almost benign — from up here. Ahead lay a plateau. On it was grassland dotted with shady flat-topped trees: the lion-haunted savannah of my boyhood dreams.

If I merely state that the truck broke down next; that we walked for miles in the heat and then sat for hours being eaten by mosquitoes before we were rescued; and that, on reaching Brazzaville at two-thirty the following morning, the three of us were on the point of collapse, then I'm sure you will forgive me for not going into detail. There is, after all, a limit to how much suffering people can take.

* * *

Despite Africa's reluctance to let us go, ten days later we were home. Though absolutely delighted to see us, my mother was just the first of a number to say, 'But I didn't expect you for another month!' We were quickly to discover that, by returning

after only eight weeks, we had disappointed people — they felt let down. We tried to find a reason for this, but, feeling tired and oddly detached from the familiar things around us and very much confirmed in the habit of sticking together, soon gave up.

We drove to Guildford the day after getting home. Why Guildford, I don't know — perhaps it was because the town was home to so many pretty girls when I was young. We went to the fishing tackle shop on the hill. In an upstairs showroom, a display of rods greeted us. I didn't much care for the look one of them was giving me. Long and sleek and very well made, the rod clearly had expectations of fishing a beat north of the border. Martin saw me looking. 'Mmmm. Perfect for nzanda,' he said. The rod shrank back and cowered against the wall. We walked to the second-hand book shop at the bottom of the hill. On the frontispiece of Trader Horn's book, *Waters of Africa*, I found a line that seemed particularly apt, and copied it into my notebook. Then we went for a beer, but found it deadly dull after the lively stuff we had been drinking, in Brazzaville, a couple of days before. Returning to the car, we found it wouldn't start. An easily fitted part could not be had until the shops reopened on Monday. We spent much of a cold, wet Saturday night in bus stations and on buses, getting home.

A few days later, while walking in Cheltenham (a town my friends knew well), we got lost. The incident affected us, and spoiled the evening.

There was no one we could talk to, aside from a few trusties. And even to them there was little we could say, except that we were going back. To have told them we had failed to catch goliath would have been only to invite misunderstanding. We knew we had found the fish. For us, this was enough.

Mum was very good about me coming home after nearly twenty years. I watched television at first, read newspapers and went for walks, then turned to books. I reread a paperback I had found on a jumble-sale table at least a dozen years before: a life of the explorer, Sir Richard Burton — the man the Victorians loved to hate. Burton had been in Central Africa; he had discovered one of the major affluents of the River Congo; and he too, on coming home, had felt out of step. A diary entry records his sense of alienation; he wrote of feeling like 'a blaze of light without a focus.'

With my appointments book empty, and telephone eerily silent now, I sat down one night and drafted the pages of an opening chapter.

**Chapter Fifteen**

# Strange Fever

Jeremy Wade

The early symptoms of malaria, of which fever is the most common, are non-specific.

Dr Anthony Hall, in *Travellers' Health* (1986)

Malaria takes different people in different ways; and it is not completely shut out by the daily and weekly prophylactic pills that prudent travellers take. I knew both these things, and had brought drugs aplenty to treat it. But when it burst inside me, the circumstances were such that I refused to believe what would otherwise have been obvious.

We had just pulled in early for the night, tying alongside the *Ville d'Impfondo*. For a couple of days I had been feeling faint whenever I stood up; once I'd had to grab a cable to stop myself falling. As I walked through the riverside village, I felt OK; but back on the micropousseur I suddenly felt very hot, even though we were in the shade. A film of diesel oil ruled out swimming, so I sluiced down my legs and arms with cold water. Immediately I became simultaneously super-hot (my trunk and head) and shivering (arms and legs) — and drained, totally, of all energy. I found myself pulling on my tracksuit and crawling into the late-afternoon sun to keep warm. A passer-by told me it was definitely malaria and advised a one-off dose of three Nivaquine and three aspirin.

An hour later, when I had summoned the energy to put a thermometer into my mouth and consult our medical manual, a more alarming possibility presented itself. Despite a temperature of 105°F (and a regime of regular water intake), I was not sweating. Drastically cooling my extremities like that had apparently thrown my temperature control into confusion: perhaps it was heat stroke. If it was, and if I didn't do anything about it, the manual promised death within two to four hours. But while the confusing hodgepodge of symptoms matched those for heat stroke more closely than anything else, the prescribed treatment — more drastic cooling — seemed entirely inappropriate in my case. But I had to do something. I opted, by default, to follow the treatment for heat exhaustion. I took a packet of rehydration salts and cursed Martin for his lack of urgency in preparing the tea (unusual aggression is another heat stroke symptom). Then I drank as much sweet tea and salted water as I could hold, before attempting to rest. Constructing my sleeping

quarters (inner part of tent on engine room roof) was a major effort, requiring constant swearing. Between each pathetically small stage I rested for several minutes. (The others were fully occupied keeping themselves in one piece.) Then I lay in the open until late, to radiate as much heat as possible. Despite my exhaustion I resisted slipping under, since I wasn't exactly sure how to distinguish sleep from coma. Gradually my body and breath cooled. Long after the others had turned in, I zipped the tent door behind me and lay on the clammy groundsheet. I felt I had passed the turning point. I fell asleep quickly and slept well.

In the morning I awoke feeling fine — invigorated even — my physical infallibility confirmed. The next night I appeared to be back to normal.

Then at about four the following afternoon I got the shivers again (though Martin said my forehead felt hot). My back started aching in the area of my kidneys. One of my thumbs went numb; and this quickly spread to the fingers of both hands. I cast around for an alternative diagnosis and came up with a worrying new thought: both sides of my family have a history of diabetes; perhaps stress had released a cocked genetic trigger. If so, I was in real trouble. 'But probably just lack of food,' reads the hopeful afterthought in my notebook. After a couple of hours prostrate in my tracksuit, I had warmed up. Now I needed to cool down, so I sat out. 'Like being a cold-blooded animal,' I jotted. 'Temperature regulation by behaviour — hope my system snaps out of it soon.' Once I'd normalized, a good night's sleep followed.

Breakfast was as nourishing as ever: anti-malaria tabs, vitamin pill, unsweetened black coffee, cigarette smoke and trace quantities of toothpaste. Despite having no food for the rest of the day I slept well.

The next night it was the familiar pattern. Late-afternoon chills and semi-numbness in fingers, quickly followed by the need to wrap up and switch off. Then a sweaty, full-bladdered, thirsty awakening some time before midnight, forcing me to sit outside cooling off until mosquitoes and exhaustion forced me back in. A pattern was emerging. I discussed the symptoms at length with the mechanic. He said it was definitely malaria; but I persisted in believing it was an intrinsic malfunction of temperature control. Whatever it was, though, I appeared to have reached an accommodation with it. Every forty-eight hours we had a ritual exchange, and in between times I was strong. The illness punctuated the dead time. Observing it was something to do. But if the pattern continued I would take a malaria remedy and, I hoped, finish it off.

Two days later, delayed in Mossaka with the routine unchanged, I went for a blood test. Meanwhile a radio on number 40 delivered a Presidential speech bizarrely overlaid on a musical number — 'Hey! That's a nice mokobe you've just caught, Martin.' — by Phil Collins. The test was negative. I didn't take the remedy. No alternative suggestion was given. We moved on.

The illness then went into a worrying new phase. The next day I felt 'almost literally like death.' Every time I stood up I had to prevent myself from falling. I was tempted to take the remedy, but strong drugs in the absence of a diagnosis could

have made me worse. I went to bed early expecting fever but either it didn't come or, more likely, I slept through it, my exhaustion keeping me under. I briefly woke in the small hours feeling slightly sick, then at daybreak came to with a vile taste in my mouth, which wouldn't go away. Everything tasted indescribably disgusting. Now that we at last had food, I couldn't eat it. My back still ached and my urine was very dark.

The next three days I didn't even have the energy to write my notebook.

I remember fever coming the next night, the night we were thrown off the *Sangha*. Either it had missed a day or it was starting to fill in. The latter seemed more likely; I was getting progressively weaker between attacks. At midnight I was so hot that I sat outside completely naked for nearly an hour. There was no water to slake my thirst so I had to make a laborious descent to the river to collect some. I had practically no sleep. Then it was a pre-dawn start to haul everything to the truck. I was now having trouble with vision: everything was flat and far too bright — like snow-blindness. I was starting to see flashing lights. When Martin first pointed out the monster goliath to me, I couldn't see it.

The truck journey to Brazzaville was, in terms of physical suffering, the worst day I have ever lived through: twenty-one and a half hours of hell, with no end in sight until we reached it. I believed at one stage that I might die. The sun's rays burnt as never before, as though converged by a giant magnifying glass, and the physical stress was constant. The thought of getting off and passing out under some roadside bush miles from anywhere became an ever more inviting alternative. When we broke down and were forced to walk I was almost at breaking point. Hours later on the miraculous rescue truck, fully clothed inside a sodden sleeping bag, I shivered the four remaining hours to Brazzaville, too weak to parry the constant blows from parts of the vehicle to my forehead, base of skull and lower back. Just attempting to note the bare facts of the journey two days later reduced me to tears.

We blacked out at the Domingo at four in the morning. On awaking several hours later, semi-comatose and disorientated, I took a course of Halfan malaria treatment. As the light faded at the end of a day almost without words from any of us, I drifted into sleep. I woke several times in the night, sodden with sweat. However, each time I felt neither hot nor cold; I just wiped myself down and crawled back into wet bedclothes. In the morning I was noticeably much better. After one more night I felt normal. It had been eleven days between onset and recovery. Eight days later, following the advice of a pharmacist I had consulted, I dropped three Fansidar to mop up anything that might still be lurking.

So was the test result a false negative, or was it really something other than malaria? Was the drug cure or coincidence? Checking my notebook, I see that the first symptoms were preceded twelve days before by our night on the sand. When I hooked the ngolo, Adolphe had bundled all the other rods into the bottom of the pirogue. I subsequently spent an hour disentangling and recasting them, during which time my repellent-free hands were black with mosquitoes. (It's an unfortunate

*We intervened just seconds before the machete descended, to take this rare look at an intact mboga*

*On our way to meet goliath in the main river*

*Dawn breaks after our chaotic night on the sands*

fact that insect repellent can weaken fishing line.) This attack could have overwhelmed the suppressants in my blood, and its timing squares with the normal incubation period for malaria.

On our return to Britain I was told that there was no immediate way of retrospective diagnosis. But if I had any fever in the six months following my last anti-malaria tabs, I was to have a blood test straight away.

'And if I don't have fever in that time?' I asked.

'Then your system's probably clear.'

There has been no recurrence.

**Chapter Sixteen**

# Reluctant Return

*Jeremy Wade* / Paul Boote

He who has drunk of the waters of Africa
must needs after many days to quench his thirst thereat.

*Arab proverb*

I must say when I saw the Congo again — when its vast and gaunt waters broke on my view,
and the blaze of its intemperate sun made me close my eyes in sheer physical pain,
I felt like turning tail at the mouth of the river.

Roger Casement, *letter to Sir Martin Gosselin* (1902)

... and always he is the same, fast, fierce and unexpected,
a compact, violent fish that takes like a thunderbolt and, unless you know your job, is
gone like a flicker of light.

V. Fox-Strangways (on the common tigerfish), *Wandering Fisherman* (1955)

*Outside the porthole the cloud curtain is rising; the Tupolev 154 slides in unreal slow motion down through deep, patchy cloud. We make out ethereal fragments of a brown, undulating landscape, scratched with earth tracks and pocked with small matchbox settlements. Above our seats, silent jets and tongues of condensation start to stream from air nozzles and vents in a weird dry ice show. Despite our lack of enthusiasm for coming back ('Looking forward to it? You must be joking'), I feel my pulse shift up a gear.*

*We break through the cloud base, and there, through the starboard portholes, is the immense khaki slash of the river, flexing its mountainous muscles over the Djoué rapids. A fortnight ago and in gentler mood, some of that froth would have been slipping past the low-water sandbars of our distant destination.*

*We continue north, and down, towards the Siamese twin capitals at the head of the rapids. On the other side the jagged, faintly menacing skyscraper-line of Kinshasa and (THUMP!) rushing backwards now beneath our wheels the more laid-back soil of — as the cheers and clapping behind us confirm —* 'Braz-za-ville!'

*Outside, the semi-liquid atmosphere tastes of scalded wood and scorches the lungs. We head for the Domingo, and find ourselves in the same room that we washed up in after last year's truck horror.*

*We sleep off a journey the duration of four working days in one night, then get*

*straight to business. First priority is security clearance — we can't move from the capital without it. I applied in advance from Britain this time, to cut down the wait. But the ministries we visit are empty. Even the gatehouse at State Security HQ is deserted. Our arrival has coincided with the country's biggest shake-up since independence. Everybody who's anybody is at the National Conference, urgently convened to chart the nation's future. After following a trail of locked doors, we meet a bespectacled young man who disappears up an echoing corridor, comes back, and beckons us into an empty office. The crisp document awaits us on top of an out-tray pile. We can now fix the date for our flight to first base. Adrenalin is already cooking at the thought of boarding the plane (last year's experience would have made the fall of Saigon look orderly) but it will be more than worth it for the time it saves.*

*There are no seats for over two weeks.*

*A dejected walk to the port yields surprise consolation: a boat leaves the day after tomorrow. That would take us halfway. It connects with a shallow-draught coche that ascends the tributary. Total journey time eight days. Instant decision followed by instant panic. The bank transforms crisp purple sheets into sufficient CFA for the next two months, plus contingency. We trek to the city fringe to liberate medical and other supplies stored since last year. We sleep. We join an impatient straggle for boat tickets, and hand over money for plane tickets back (date to be fixed the other end). The market is packing up for the night when we start the hunt for provisions: stove, machete, rice, tins of sardines, onions, garlic, tea, coffee, milk powder ... Only at the last moment, on the verge of insanity, do we track down a plastic jerrycan for transporting vital kerosene. Already our faces are red from hours in the sun, and our clothes are permanently soaked. Back at the hotel there is no water.*

*In the middle of all this we manoeuvre everybody we can into conversations about the weather.*

*'So it's the rainy season now in Brazzaville?'*

*'No, the dry season. Although ... (thoughtful look) ... we did have some rain three days ago.'*

*A second person clarifies. 'Actually, now is in fact what's known as the little rainy season.'*

*'Aha! So although it's raining a bit now, it's not as wet as the main wet season.'*

*'Yes.'*

*Phew!*

*'Except it often rains more in the little rainy season than it does in the big rainy season.'*

*'I see....'*

**Day 3 / Departure**

I can't believe it — the authorization in hand on day one! We have written a card to Martin. It reads something like this:

> Hey! Brazzaville! It's good to be back! Arrived safely, but are worried — permission was at the ministry, waiting for us! We can leave at once, and will make our escape bid tomorrow (by boat, plane a problem). Something has to go wrong. We've been given a warning — saw the *Sangha* today! Formed crosses with fingers and brandished cloves of garlic. Our tributary has probably dried up, or the town is the intended epicentre of the world's largest earthquake, or goliath is extinct ... Wish you were here etc.

In a strange way, it *is* good to be back; familiarity breeds begrudging affection. And I feel a lot happier for having made a belated start-of-decade resolution: that this will be the last bout of lunacy, the final low-budget venture into the unknown. After this, no more trips — unless I'm jetted and float-planed in to some exotic fishing lodge and plied with drink at the Joe Brooks Bar. In the coming weeks, I'm going to fish for goliath with an unwavering persistence, catch him, go home, finish the book, and then dedicate my life to the pursuit of mindless pleasure.

We leave the hotel at eight a.m. The taxi goes to the city post office first, where we despatch our mail, and then to the port. A hundred yards short of the departure hall, we are halted by traffic and crowds. The driver makes a patient way through, stops before the entrance, helps us to unload and wishes us luck. We join the throng, slowly: we weighed our main items of luggage yesterday, and found they pulled 254 pounds.

The remnants of last week's flu have returned and are making me feel feverish. Yesterday's provisioning madness didn't help. I'm feeling positive though, and so is Jeremy. We are sitting in the check-in hall and, like many travellers who own a pen, I feel a list coming on.

Around us is the stock of a 1950s Woolworths on the move. Rolls of three- to six-inch-thick foam secured with electrical flex seem very popular. The Congolese, even the quite poor ones, appear to sleep more comfortably than the average Indian. They can beat them on containers too: baskets, bowls (aluminium, enamel, plastic and porcelain), cans (from the one-person-snack to the feed-the-five-thousand size) and bags (plastic supermarket, much stitched sports grip, monogrammed suitcase promising affluence and sophistication) occupy every inch of floor space and trail into the dusty road outside. Food is much in evidence — in all its forms of preservation.

We check in, tendering tickets, passports and the special authorization. The latter, signed by a high-ranking general, commands the attention of a senior immigration official. We return to our bags and sit on them. A tide of people floods the hall. We can recognize them now — identify some of the types: the broad-hipped mama of mountainous luggage and raucous voice, the flat-top-cutted dudes posing in trainers and faded Levis, the fisherman with feet and hands of cracked horn returning to a distant campement — the professional lady, with her all too obvious curves, mincing past in heels. Sitting next to us, in complete contrast, is the wife of a young fisherman. With high cheekbones, long slender nose and disturbing almond eyes, her face has a beauty that could launch a thousand pirogues. I'm hooked. And —

how embarrassing — suddenly busying herself with baby, she knows that I am.

The gates giving access to the riverboat moored fifty yards away are opened at nine-thirty. Suspecting that possession of a berth is nine-tenths of the law, we are anxious to get on board. We start in pole position and for a few seconds have the quay to ourselves, then are swamped. On reaching the waterfront, we witness a scene from an old pirate movie. People are throwing themselves across a four-foot gap between the quay and the deck; they are assisted, not repelled, by friends and relatives who have already made the leap. Bags fly or are frantically passed. The air vibrates to shouts in several languages. Jeremy, more compactly laden than me, makes the deck. I almost do the same, but the rod tube I am carrying is hit by a passing sack at the moment of take-off, and I narrowly miss falling in. In due course, a story in the British papers might have run with, 'Briton Drowns in Congo,' but missed the real horror: 'Briton Eaten by Mboga.'

On board, everyone finds a place and settles down — except us; we become nomads. Nobody — crewman or passenger — can tell us where our bunks (a cryptic 9 and 10 on the tickets, followed by an unbreakable code) are to be found. Nor does the situation improve when the boat is under way. Hours are wasted: sitting outside an empty cabin number 9, and by the shower rooms on the riverboat's middle deck (for reasons of sitting-space rather than intended utility), and visiting a foetid dormitory in the bows. As dusk falls, a man with a big bunch of keys admits us to a cabin on the first floor of an old accommodation barge that's pure Mississippi. By doing so, he upgrades us from below decks to some kind of tourist class. We thank him and move in.

In the twilight a wind blows up, causing the stallholders' tarpaulins to flutter like the lashes of a lovestruck teenager. But it's only a warning; the weather war is being waged to the west, over the Plateau. We stand at the rail outside the cabin, in a soft rain, and watch the sky weld itself to the land. Fork lightning arcs great distances between banks of cloud, occasionally stabbing earthward, giving moments of day for night. Never have I seen such lightning. As we go to bed, separate storms still play upon the western horizon, forming a continuous band of dancing light.

**Day 5**

*Not a comfortable night. Don't remember sleeping at all, though doubtless I did slip under a couple of times.*

*Rigged up mosquito net using hooks screwed into ceiling. Paul on bottom bunk with his attached to bed frame. Repaired grille over window space with tape (mozzies outside like queues to January sales). Tied door shut and all gear together. Lay naked on bed and poured sweat into sleeping bag liner. Suffering crutch rot and groin strain (don't know how I got that) and the aftermath of a giant boil up my left nostril. In other words, pretty run down.*

*Cabin is a vermin theme park. Mouse droppings in basin (but no water). Cockroaches making constant forays from gap at base of wall. Their intelligence gives*

The Congolese refer to a number of scaly species as 'carpe'. This monganza weighs close to 30lb; we saw a close relative — a mopongo — that would have topped 50lb

*me the creeps and they're abominably resilient: I flatten one with my trainer only to watch two legs pull a pile of gunge back towards sanctuary.*

*Lie in till about seven. Weather pleasantly dull. President Mobutu's personal boat has just passed us, going downstream: helicopter parked on the back and military guards everywhere. The man himself didn't appear.*

*The river here is only about half a mile wide. Round-topped hills and steep banks on both sides: deep water. I walk to the front of the fourteen-barge platform, from where the throb of the twin diesels, a hundred metres back, is all but inaudible. The water is hitting the flat bow at a good ten knots, yet relative to the banks we are hardly moving. We are battling against the output of the entire river basin here, travelling up the spout of a funnel whose rim encloses an area nearly the size of all of Europe, west and east. It will get easier once we are past the mouth of the Kwa,*

*swollen with the floodwaters of southern Zaire, and the river starts to widen out.*

*We are further slowed by over twenty* baleinières *— black, warlike-looking vessels up to thirty metres long — clinging to our sides like remoras. When these detach, they will be filled with merchandise and return to Brazzaville. Their deep, plank-built hulls carry up to a thousand fifty-kilo sacks of dried manioc, a crew member of one tells me.*

*A pirogue with a sail cuts swiftly upriver on the breeze. The brightening sun has raised the cabin temperature to thirty-five Celsius. Outside, towels and drapes hang from every available rail; they are so saturated with white light that all colour seems drained out of them. The only exception is the Congolese flag atop one of the baleinières: a bright splash of red fluttering against the foam-streaked grey-brown of the river.*

*The boat continues through the night, twin searchlights feeling their way along the shoreline. Moths spin in the beams. A disembodied voice crackles down from the darkened bridge:* 'La lumière! La lumière! Barge Liranga!' *Somebody has drawn back a curtain and is screwing up the helmsman's night vision. One of the beams rakes our barge and settles its hot glare on a cubicle just along from ours.* 'Madame!' *(yes you)* 'S'il vous plaît.' *The cabin light goes out.*

*Trying to sleep, I concentrate on the sound of the engines. The homogeneous noise becomes a chord, then separates into its constituent notes: the mechanical rumble of shafts (a distinguishable oscillation of several cycles per second); the low-frequency* boom-boom-boom *of the exhaust; and above it all the almost ultrasonic trill of valve gear, like a mechanical cicada.*

**Day 5 — take 2**

I give up at seven-thirty. After only three hours of cooked-out sleep, my head feels as if the contents of the sinker box migrated to it during the night. I need tea badly. Over several pints of the stuff, Jeremy and I discuss the relative merits of a well-wielded flip-flop (manoeuvrability, lightning-fast response) and the size 8 training shoe (massive killing-power) in our war against cockroaches partying in the cabin last night.

It's good to be outside in the fresh cool air. Below, on every square metre of deck, the women — ever capable and resourceful — are preparing breakfast, bathing baby, dressing children and managing tiny provisions-stalls — all at the same time. The men are drifting back from the showers, towels over shoulders. The prospect of a shower is suddenly appealing; I look for my towel, first in the cabin, then, remembering, on the gangway rail. It's gone, of course — my only towel. I am not at all happy, and air my displeasure at unnecessary length. Later, I select a cotton T-shirt as a substitute, and go off to join the queues outside the riverboat's showers.

There are three showers; two are occupied, the third is silent behind a handleless door. Then I notice the other doors lack handles, too, and that those leaving a

shower are quickly intercepted by the next man in, who grabs the door before it can latch shut. After a twenty-minute wait it is my turn, and I'm ready. Out comes the occupant, only to slam the door behind him. The waiting assembly groans. Two showers down now, and only one to go. A young man stops and asks if there is a problem; he is told about the door. Reaching into the pocket of his ragged shorts, he produces a pair of blunt-nosed scissors. With a knowing smile, he inserts the closed blades into the handleless, spindleless hole, gently twists them, and opens the door with a cheery *'Voilà, monsieur!'* I thank him and take my shower.

After the inevitable porridge breakfast, we sit with coffee, and look about. To our left, a family — man, wife, two toddlers and a couple of male friends — occupies the deck space of an open corridor between the two blocks of upper-floor cabins. We lend our stove. The family has one, but is low on kerosene. Fuel, we are told, is available from a commerçant somewhere in the sea of tarpaulins below, but costs at least double the on-shore price.

We take it in turns to walk around. I go to the stern of the riverboat, the *Ville de Brazzaville*, the sister vessel of last year's *Impfondo*. Here, propellors chew water into a fibrous soup, and birds weave patterns in the air. Terns slice with sickle wings, and black kites quarter with heavier, blunter ones — both rise and fall and sweep from side to side as they pick at the bobbing trash from our floating town. The French-speaking Congolese call the kite *l'épervier* — kestrel, and use the same word for a fisherman's cast-net, on account of the similarity of the action of its weighted circumference, when drawn in, to that of the talons of a hawk.

Through the morning the heat builds, and by one o'clock I can't even *think* in words of more than two syllables. People wilt in every scrap of shade; exhausted men laze beneath natty golfing-umbrellas; a few fortunate infants lie in plastic baby-baths, the rest are seated in some of the many bowls on board; every sunless gangway is strewn with sleepers. I watch a mother, parasol in hand, sluice down her naked six-year-old son with powdery-brown river water from a bucket, whilst a four-year-old daughter, equally naked, raises her arms above her head, puts a curve in her back and adopts the sort of bathing-belle pose you might have seen, a lifetime ago, if you had stared through the peephole of a coin-machine at the end of a British pier. The mother, detecting suggestion in the pose, instantly douses her daughter; the child dances about and screams with pleasure.

At three we are lying on our bunks in the airless cabin, with sunlight lancing through the open window, and a grime-encrusted curtain doing little to stop it. I create a complex fantasy about an iceberg, of collecting — as the partying passengers of the doomed *Titanic* did — the ice fragments that fall onto the deck as the berg brushes past the boat, and playing snowballs with them. The feverishness has returned, and I'm feeling rather poorly.

An hour later, with the heat receding, people, who minutes earlier were slumped in every attitude of repose, begin to promenade the decks and join the procession that is making an indolent way towards the hard-worked showers. We see a wider

river now, with hilly banks flattening fast. And we see many more villages — present, perhaps, because the slightly slower currents here (we are in the upper couloir now) permit the use of paddled pirogues. A baleinière passes on its way downriver. Loaded to the gunwales with great bags of manioc, it has little freeboard. I remember watching a similar, beached whale of a boat tethered in a riverside shallow last year, and wondering, momentarily, if it could help us to escape from a place at which a surly captain had just dumped us and was now drawing away from.

Shortly before dusk, the bread sticks that have lain on roofs and barge decks, drying in the sun, are collected and put away. Some will be eaten with a fish bouillon tonight, others dunked in mugs of coffee at breakfast tomorrow morning. It's the last bread anyone will see until Mossaka. The river surface tarnishes rapidly beneath the setting sun — from shimmering silver to deep lead-grey in minutes. The recently erected sheet-tin roofs of villages on the eastern shore glitter briefly in the last light, before being taken by the forest. A barge deck, not fifty yards from where I sit, is stacked with piles and rolls of roofing metal, which is replacing palm frond and reed thatch just as quickly as these villagers, a short cruise from civilization by Central African standards, can afford it. In the thickening light our scavenging cortège of birds wings back shoreward.

At eight we see lights ahead on the Congo bank; after half an hour they seem no nearer. At ten we slow to allow the baleinières to peel off and make their way towards a single light on shore. We follow them. As the boat comes in, its spotlamp picks out people running down a sandy slope, a line of ramshackle houses, a spreading mango tree and a building that I recognize. It's the purée-splattered hotel. I groan and rudely gesticulate; Jeremy says nothing, but merely pulls a face.

**Day 6**

*We're approaching the end of the narrow, turbulent couloir. Up ahead the hills abruptly stop. Beyond is the forest. The river is getting wider. The boat starts to swarm with men hawking plastic sandals, antibiotics of dubious authenticity, exercise books, mandarins, curved ten-foot sugarcanes and aluminium bowls full of dried manioc tubers. And fish. Our first goliath flashes before us, a baby of a few pounds. Voices are suddenly raised below us. I ask Francis, a vacationing biology student who's telling me about the Congolese education system, what's going on.*

*'The Zairois — they dispute.'*

*'What about?'*

*'Oh, I don't know. I don't understand their* patois.*'*

*'So they're not speaking Lingala?' (It sounded like it to me.)*

*'No.'*

*'Is it always the Zairois selling stuff?'*

*'Yes — always looking for money,' he sighs.*

*'Never Congolese?'*

*'No, we just eat and stay calm.'*

*It's a funny thing, this river. Despite the continuous diffusion across it of goods, money and people, there is no tendency towards equilibrium. The temperaments of the two peoples remain poles apart.*

*I go for a walk round the upper storeys of the* Brazzaville. *A pirogue is trying to attach itself to the side of a barge below. Two people are aboard: the man in front has grabbed an already fastened pirogue and is leaving Tom and Jerry fingernail scratches all down its side as the current tries to rip him away. Lots of people are enjoying the spectacle. Just after I turn away there is a loud cheer: the front man has fallen in. The stern man looks expressionlessly up at the gallery as his pirogue accelerates backwards into the wake.*

*The temperature climbs. Hot air fills the sagging tarpaulins of the merchants' stalls. There must be four or five miles between the banks now. It's the aqueous equivalent of the Indian Plains: 360 degrees of absolutely flat horizon. A total absence of contours — and colour. Monotony. I look upriver and the position of the horizon is only discernible from the presence of faint grey streaks — forested islands — between the colourless water and the colourless sky. I half close my eyes and they melt and disappear. The boat is suspended, motionless, in white space.*

*How will we find the fish in all this water?*

*Clouds have been building all afternoon. Shortly after the six-fifteen 'lights out' the wind gets up, accelerating purposefully. Then rain, blasting horizontally from behind us. Suddenly it's coming from all directions at once, imploding through the window grille into the cabin. The floor lurches erratically. Quite a lightshow has started outside: searchlights frantically sweeping between boat and shore, superimposed on the celestial strobe. I see the barges buck and rear, their edges working up and down like giant guillotine blades, as metre-high waves traverse underneath. The cables holding everything together must be close to snapping — if just one goes, the whole lot (including us, on the high-sided, top-heavy* Liranga*) will be cast adrift. Along the river's banks (we later discover), roofs are being torn from huts and pirogues smashed at their moorings. Urgent megaphone instructions are shouted to the drenched and dazzled crew on the bow. It looks like we're coming into the lee of an island, where a cable is run ashore and fastened round the bole of a tree (though it's hard to see exactly what's going on through the rain)....*

*At length, the percussion of the barges becomes a hollow diminuendo — it seems the immediate danger is over. I strip to my shorts and stand out on the deserted balcony (no need to trek to the showers tonight) before retiring to sleep as the* Brazzaville *cowers, its rocking gradually subsiding, waiting for the storm to pass.*

**Day 7**

The nights are getting longer. I come round from dark, dehydrated dreams to hear voices in the dawn. 'André!' they say, or, 'Antoine!' or, 'Eh — Marie-Claire! Ça va?' I

remind myself that I'm in Africa, and roll from my sweated bunk to find and fire the stove. I envy Jeremy his sleep of the dead, yet know one shaft of sunlight will end that blissful oblivion. He groans as I re-enter the cabin, painfully cheerful, bearing a mug of tea.

I leave him and go outside, drinking in the delicious coolness before the smarting light and improbable thermometer readings make this day another hell to be endured. I feel lousy, bored to the point where imagination is shorn of its potency, and restless. I just want to get off this boat and get at those fish. Still, there's porridge to look forward to; and Mossaka later, if our neighbours are correctly informed. Jeremy will be out of bed soon, and straight into a shopping list. How does it go? Eight onions, five stock cubes, two spaghetti, bread times eight, purée times four, a mound of peanut butter, loads of bananas, a few avocados (a treat I'm already sick of) and, afterwards, a relaxing beer? Yes, that will do nicely. *Sail on!*

A rare English-speaker pays us a call. He introduces himself in ultra-polite, very formal English. He's a young businessman travelling north to buy fish and bushmeat for resale in Brazzaville. He leaves when he has exhausted his stock of English, and me. Soon Jeremy is speaking with another entrepreneur — one of the men living on deck outside our cabin. He has boxes of soap (Lifebuoy — Made in Kingston-upon-Thames) to sell in a large village up our tributary. It will command a good price, he says, for the brand is popular here, having medicinal properties. (Later, we were to see soap being applied to the bodies of bathers — arms, shoulders and neck especially — in a lather so thick as to be a paste, and allowed to remain on the skin and dry there. It keeps off the mosquitoes, we were told.)

Mercifully, the day is dull. By mid-afternoon a south wind is ripping up the river into waves. To the north a weather front slides out of the east and sprawls fat and dark upon the horizon, blocking our way. As we near it, opposing winds — from north and south — push and shove at each other, and rain sieves down. Suddenly, the heat's dominion is broken and I dive into the cabin to snatch an hour's sleep. It's the best I've had in days.

We reach Mossaka at six o'clock, in a bilious light that's part dusk, part brief glimmerings after the storm. Jeremy wishes to see the spot where malaria felled him last year; he only dimly remembers it now. We set off down the river road, leaving the new jetty at the port, walking past the church (where a sign warns us not to play football on its eminently suitable square), along a puddly lane, towards the former French end of town. The recently closed shop, on whose veranda we had camped, lies empty; drifts of sand and items of tawdry refuse are lifted by a fitful breeze and dropped back on the concrete where we had lain. The porticoed villa next door (with star-motif iron balustrades and wooden shutters sucked of all moisture by force of sun) still houses a local family or two; their half-dozen roosters are strenuously seeing off the day. When addressing the subject of post-colonial Zaire, authors often write of rich dilapidations, but in the Congo we can find only petty decay. I'm

wearing a light pullover, and Jeremy his tracksuit top; we need them this evening, for it is chilly. We head back to the market, to buy food and find a beer.

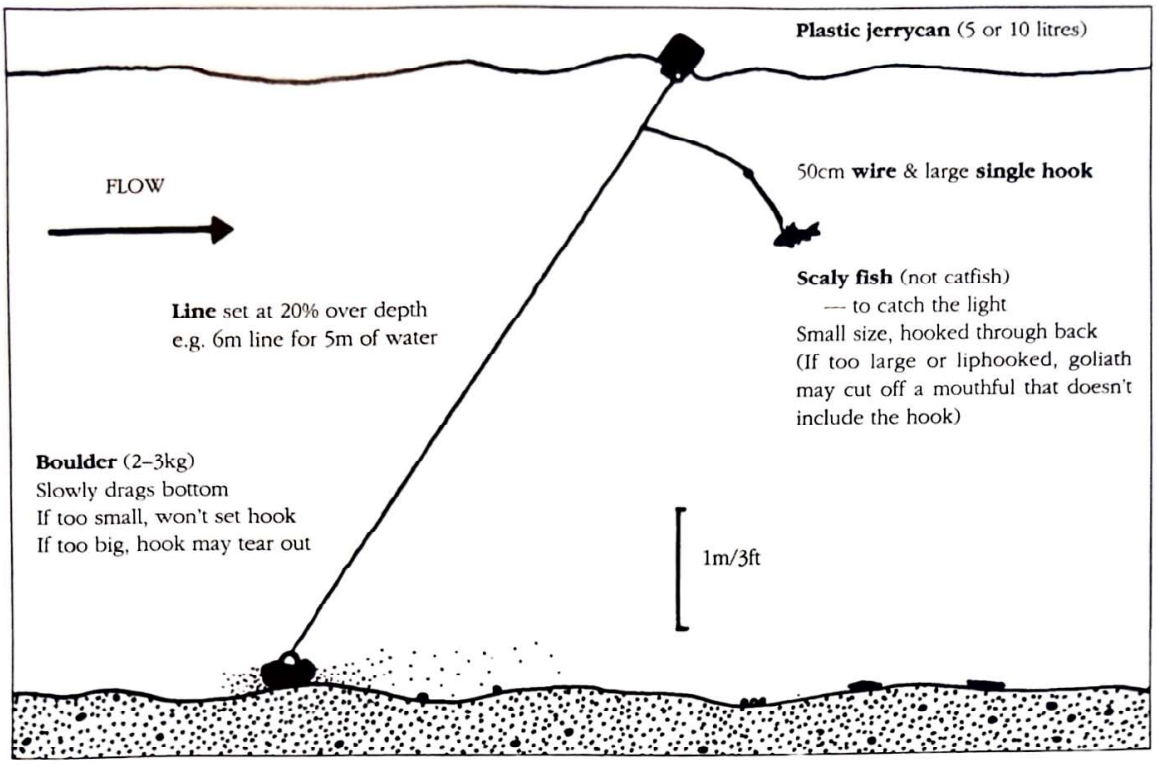
**Day 8**

Awake at four-twenty, and on the tea before seven. Below me, those who didn't sleep on shore last night slumber beneath a mist of nets. And they need them, lacking a moving boat or river breeze to keep the squadrons of little sharp-nosed fighter planes at bay. I tell Jeremy, between hoarse barks and explosive sneezes, that I have to come all the way to Africa to cop a streaming cold and permanent headache. Oh yes, I feel just *terrific!*

Coffee cranks me into partial consciousness. At nine-thirty, having brayed out ten- and five-minute warnings on a klaxon, the boat casts off and travels down the last few hundred yards of reedy Likouala before moving out into the main river. We pass boys fishing, families washing and racks of newly carved canoe paddles for sale. There is much good-natured waving and banter. Oddly, the scene reminds me of a photograph in a book I have stored in a box somewhere — a picture of the Thames taken in one of the long hot summers before 1914, an image of happy people (at leisure, not at work, as here) beside an untrammelled, still-wild river. Suddenly, I experience an emotion that I pride myself on never feeling when away from Britain: I feel terribly homesick. I swallow hard and watch the waterfront.

We pass a few commercial vessels at their moorings, barges mostly and pousseurs. Jeremy turns to give them a glance. I know that we have both been looking, secretly, since getting back; neither admitting to the other what we were doing, nor daring to think the impossible — the unthinkable — could happen. But it does. We see it simultaneously: number 40, at Mossaka, still afloat. On board, a crew is making ready to sail. But there is no Gregoire; the lucky little tub has a different captain now.

The town falls quickly behind astern. I notice that the waters of the Congo now have a fine, clear, russet colour, like slightly clouded bitter beer — very different from the thick brown tide of our last visit. I sit on the gunwale of a barge and watch the passing banks. Within an hour forest has replaced reed-bed; trees muscle down to the water's edge, and roots squirm at their feet: the river looks interesting. White-breasted, red-beaked kingfishers use branches protruding from the tangle as launch pads; further out, their pied brethren buzz widths of water, swoop up suddenly to a hovering halt, align their sights, crash dive onto a small fish then streak towards the trees with a trilling *peep peep.* Here and there, as though swatted by a giant hand, a line of trees lies drowned where it fell. The current surges past their partly submerged tops in a series of curling eddies, wells up ponderously from deep-sunken obstructions and darts out in assertive diagonals before being readmitted to the flow. Often, tumbles of black-brown rock accompany these impressive graveyards, extending from the forest at their upstream edge. They are major diversions in their own right, and the resulting watery features — crease, back-eddy


**Plastic jerrycan** (5 or 10 litres)
FLOW
50cm **wire** & large **single hook**
**Scaly fish** (not catfish)
— to catch the light
Small size, hooked through back
(If too large or liphooked, goliath may cut off a mouthful that doesn't include the hook)
**Line** set at 20% over depth
e.g. 6m line for 5m of water
**Boulder** (2–3kg)
Slowly drags bottom
If too small, won't set hook
If too big, hook may tear out
1m/3ft

*Method for goliath as described by Congolese* mbomi mbisi *(literally, fish murderer): simple components but a highly evolved, balanced set-up*

and slack — positively scream fish: we expect to witness the slash of a feeding goliath at any second. But, apart from an occasional dimpling of fry or small tomba strike, we see nothing. This is a river that likes to keep its secrets.

**Conversations with a fish murderer**

*While queueing interminably for one of the lightless, oven-like shower cells on the main boat, I get talking to a quietly spoken, scrupulously polite young man. While most Congolese know a thing or two about fish — it is, after all, their staple protein source — Rufin Zikito turns out to know more than most. Unemployed pisciculture graduate, amateur anthropologist and writer, he recently spent a year making his living as a fisherman in his home village. He visits our barge several times to talk fishing lore.*

*He specializes in drift-netting for* mboto *(picture a chunky black-skinned river bream with an adipose fin), which is much prized for its very tasty, oily, yellow flesh. This method is only possible in high water; in low water mboto imprison themselves in sunken trees.*

*In his village nobody fishes for goliath. It's not economically viable: too much time and net damage for too few fish. And no demand. But on his considerable travels he has studied goliath fishermen at work.*

*He draws a diagram (copied here) of a favoured set-up: a jerrycan, a large rock, some thick nylon rope and wire (moped brake cable is rated about right), a big hook.*

*But the crude components are deceptive. It's an arrangement of some finesse and sophistication, as he explains. Every detail is significant.*

*Once the tackle is dropped into the water, normally from a pirogue, the weight of current against float slowly drags the boulder downstream, simultaneously spinning the bait a metre below the surface. It's a float-paternoster — but, unusually, one that moves. Several such rigs are set at intervals.*

*When goliath strikes and feels resistance, his natural reaction is to jump. In doing so he lifts the boulder and sets the hook — so it's also a bolt rig, a concept only current among British anglers in the last decade. If he then dives, he is pulling against the resistance of the float. The line is always under tension; there is never the slack he requires to throw the hook.*

*Waiting and watching, the fisherman paddles out and, when the fish is tired enough to allow it, grabs the line below the float, harpoon at the ready. To boat goliath, if it is a big one, he must tip the small fishing pirogue sideways and bring the fish in with half a pirogue full of water — then bale like crazy to avoid sinking.*

*Later, scanning the shore, Rufin points to a promontory of tumbled rocks. 'That is where you'll find mbenga,' he says.*

*'The bweta over there?' (This tallies with what we have already been told about location.)*

*'Yes ... you know this word?'*

*'Turning water.'*

*'Ah, but it's more than just that. It's the whole thing: water, rocks, and the forest behind. And there is always a big tree — see!' Behind the rocks is a veritable space-rocket, its huge fluted trunk gleaming white in the sunlight. 'These places have a mystical significance for us,' he continues. 'They're said to be haunted by sirens. And they're given names — usually the name of the family that lives alongside. This family has a special relationship with the bweta. If they have a problem, they will go and speak to the river here.'*

**Transfer to coche**

The past two days are a blur. My health has declined to a point where I can hardly be bothered to write. I recall endless stretches of blue-green forest turning purple in the haze, the pitiful writhings of a pair of four-foot lizards at the bottom of a small sharp boat, bankside trees with blossom the colour of Devon cream, and Jeremy's marked progress with spoken Lingala. I have erased the rest, or not taken it in. We're approaching the village on the tributary where a coche awaits us. In this low water, the riverboat can go no further. Our adopted family is offering advice about domestic arrangements on the coche; the soap salesman promises to help us move our things. There is nothing that makes me more sick than feeling ill.

We tie up beside two flat-decked barges that must surely hold the densest concentration of livestock and humanity the world has ever seen. People, pigs, goats

— the whole river-borne shebang — cower beneath scraps of holed plastic, in an effort to escape the rays of a withering sun. The babies and the pigs are really suffering. The waiting assembly will go back with the *Brazzaville* to Mossaka, and some individuals much further — to the capital; what is for certain, those pigs are not on board to get a suntan.

After a long delay, during which there were moments of confusion and sheer bloody chaos, we find ourselves aboard the up-bound coche. Our piece of it is an accommodation barge with a cabin superstructure covering a below-decks dormitory. The vessel was built in Germany, beside the River Rhine, in 1984. On delivery it must have been handsome — a fine example of much in little — but now, in 1991, with all of its electrics ripped out, tiny shower cubicles vandalized and one remaining toilet filled with earth, it's a mess. We have a bunk each though, and it's my turn to have the upper one — the bed that's near a tiny window whose mosquito mesh was torn in a past attempt to steal it. The dormitory is dark and airless and cramped; but we'll be on deck during the day, we tell ourselves.

The deck outside, a few steep steps above, is filling fast; sixty people have already colonized the cabin roof. Our little rear-deck is becoming a creche and a sanctuary for nursing mothers, from whom, at first, we receive cautious, though not unfriendly looks. I mount a charm offensive, and blaze away with my most winning smile; Jeremy follows up with a line in Lingala; and suddenly we're in! A crewman appears and asks one of the women to move — he requires access to a door in the cabin's rear wall. As the door opens, I see a small room and, inside, a generator in almost new condition. A couple of creeper-lashed crocodiles are tossed in, to keep it company.

The brilliant day has become a clear, windless night with a fine full moon. In the dormitory, we quickly appreciate the luxury our riverboat cabin had afforded us. Our block of four bunks is separated from three dozen others by a plywood screen that stops a couple of feet short of the ceiling. This screen does nothing to dampen the sound of at least fifty people laughing, yelling, screaming, arguing (never less than six at a time), the incessant whine and pulse of music from a choice of several cassette players, and the non-stop howling of outraged infants. Add to this barrage a gluey sauna-like heat, and you have a compelling argument for staying at home and watching television. In the last couple of days my cold has become a vile chest-infection. Angrily, I tell Jeremy that 'I've just about had a bellyful of this shit!' — and go on to inform him that I'll rejoin the expedition on reaching our destination. 'Till then,' I conclude, 'I'm here in body only.' He gives me a nod; good friend that he is, he's used, by now, to my short-fuse moments. I withdraw into silent misery.

We spend a second day and night moored in front of a line of huts, before the captain decides to sail. I rally sufficiently on the second day of waiting, to exchange smiles with a young woman, Régina, who is travelling — with her baby girl, husband and younger sister — to take up a position as domestic science teacher at

the school in 'our' town. Though we share no common language, I am aware that she is a highly intelligent, capable woman; and an attractive one, too. Her presence here lightens the darkness.

**Day 12**

*Wake up in the night with sore throat and phlegm. It's two o'clock. Silence. I'm covered in gritty dust; every stirring in the bunk above sends down a fresh shower. Sleeping bag liner stinks of ammonia — all that sweat fermenting. My lower back is aching. Whatever position I try, I can't get comfortable.*

*We get moving at dawn. (No night-time navigation now — too much risk of grounding.) At eleven o'clock, Régina asks me the time. I tell her.*

*'Is that all?' she groans.*

*'At twelve it will be even hotter,' I venture light-heartedly.*

*She rolls her eyes. 'We're all going to die.'*

*11.40* — SOMETHING LIKE THIS HAD TO HAPPEN. *Gérard has just come into the cabin to announce that the main pusher has broken down. It's terminal: the linkage between motor and propeller has broken. There's no point asking anybody else in the hope of better news; Gérard, a quietly gregarious ex-commando (returning to his village to wind up his dead grandfather's estate), is a mechanic in the Congolese marines. So now we are being pushed — four barges, three hundred people and a dead tug — by one straining micropousseur, that was originally with us just to hitch a ride. Designed for merely steering log rafts as they drift downstream, it can barely hold its place in the current. Our movement relative to the nearby bank is indetectable. Only the slow sliding of one layer of forest vegetation against the next (like the two-dimensional layers of a stage set) gives any indication of progress.*

*I try to apply the brakes to the train of thought that has started rumbling through my mind, but it has such enormity and momentum that it will not be stopped. And it is fuelled by the conversations now hissing all around, predicting the micropousseur's imminent breakdown. If that happens, there's no way we can reach our chosen destination, over a hundred miles upriver. We could take our chances wherever the boat happens to die, but this would be a very poor second best. It looks like we could have come all this way — again — for nothing.*

*12.33 — We've stopped. Several times during the last half-hour the engine has appeared to cut out, only to rev strongly straight after. Now it's definitely stopped. The barges are crashing into one another. Like someone who suspects a fatal disease, I don't want to ask what's happening. The enigmatic Chadian who occasionally shares our cabin looks across at me and quietly sighs,* 'Oh, Afrique ... Afrique ... C'est souffrance.' *Yes, it has to be said: this is the quintessential African experience. And to experience it helps one understand (and temporarily share) the streak of fatalism that*

*runs through the African psyche: the world is governed by forces beyond my control; nothing I do will influence it one jot.*

*I try some displacement activities — nail clipping, teeth cleaning, reading — but the adrenalin continues to scour my insides, building up with no outlet. Total suspense and total boredom simultaneously. Psychological matter and antimatter confined in the same space. I almost feel envious of Paul, dead to the world these last few days, courtesy of a bacterium whose modus operandi is to pump the victim's head full of high-pressure mucus.*

*Grim-faced, one of our fellow-voyagers, who has been teaching me some conversational Lingala, slips alongside me. 'This is the last time I travel on a coche,' he says. His normally quiet voice drops to a whisper. 'There has to be a change. This country has so much — wood, oil ... but for us, the ordinary people, there is only suffering.'*

*14.00 — I go up the steps from our dark cabin to the deck, squeezing past the bodies in the narrow entrance. It's raining steadily outside; everybody is huddled under plastic sheets and ... we're moving! The micropousseur has swapped places with the defunct tug to gain better purchase (that's what all the banging was), and is pushing us at a slow walking pace. Among the damp, subdued figures I detect the stirring of a cautious optimism.*

**Reflections**

The coche labours on. Life has become a routine of finding somewhere to sit undisturbed for more than a minute during the day (a capstan, a borrowed stool, a square foot of shady deck), and lying in a haze of Olbas oil and sweat at night. Though the chest-infection still reigns supreme, a late challenge from blocked sinuses above the eyes (with blinding headache as a result) makes this the worst bout of illness I have experienced since early childhood. I would happily trade it, now, for last year's ribs.

My literary output has been reduced to making lists. I already know what the river looks like — a load of water, a load of trees and a lot more sky — so I'm conserving my energy until the last eighty kilometres of this interminable journey. Then I'll really give the water we intend to fish my undivided attention — if the antibiotic course I've just started has done its job. Until then, I am listing whatever lies within my field of vision wherever I happen to be sitting down. If cholera breaks out, I'll merely note the event in my diary and ask Jeremy to fill me in with details later.

Even on a coche, so much dented and buckled and rusting scrap-ironwork, it's business as usual for the commerçants. One of the best-stocked stalls lies at the end of the barge that butts onto the back of ours. I'm sitting on one of its owner's stools, beneath a tarpaulin that flaps across a frame of crude wooden poles. The wares lie on boards covered in faded, late-fifties furnishing fabric. There is something for both the men and the women who arrive in their pirogues, out of the forest, to sell

haunches of antelope venison, banana-leaf-wrapped parcels of kwanga and exhibits from the fishy freak show that resides in this river's waters. For the women there are creams and cosmetics and half-used packets of contraceptive pills. The saddest item I see is skin lightener. This cream preparation comes in a tube, in a small cardboard box. A happy, smiling, not-so-black, thirty-something couple are pictured on it, in colour. He wears a tuxedo, she an evening dress. An endorsing slogan reads: 'As Used in High Society'.

Mostly, the men leave with fishing line bought by a unit of measurement determined by the distance between the trader's left shoulder and outstretched right hand. When his much smaller wife is running the stall, the fishermen leave, and return to buy line when her husband is back. There is also a selection of torches, bulbs and batteries for sale. I watch one man pick up a headlamp (a shoddy, Taiwanese copy of the caver's light source — I had inspected it earlier), and, placing the reflector against his forehead, pull the securing strap back over his head. I wonder what on earth he can want it for. Affectation? Is it, to him, the ultimate toy — like the walkie-talkies I lusted after as a boy? I cannot tell, nor can I ask. He puts the lamp down, gives it a look of longing, then walks off.

**Day 15**

*Lots of exposed sand now, the meandering of the navigation channel getting more and more tortuous. In some places we cut across at ninety degrees to the bank. In some places we even go backwards. The coche, like a tired old salmon, continues without respite.*

*We start to inch up a very narrow, shallow, boiling channel. The navigation markers, elsewhere several hundred metres apart, concentrate into a diabolical obstacle course. A crew member on the bow pushes a sounding pole into the water. A second man signals to the helmsman, out of sight at the other end of this floating shanty town: one finger aloft, a theatrical flourish; two fingers, another flourish — two metres. The helmsman steers by subtly shifting the angle of attack, allowing the current to edge the bow round, then quickly over-correcting before we're swept right round. It's a delicate balancing act, particularly here, with the stern only able to move a very limited distance to either side before hitting bottom. Despite this, and the woeful lack of horsepower at his disposal, the helmsman displays an impressively sure touch. We slip between the final two buoys and the water opens out again.*

*I continue sketching the continuous strip map in my notebook. This is an area we could possibly end up fishing. We pass some textbook goliath features: rocky banks, sunken skeletons of dead trees, darkly circling water.*

*11.20 — What's that ahead? A faint yellow-brown finger reaching into our path ...* 'Nzelo! Nzelo!' *comes a panic-stricken cry. We're heading straight for a sandbar. Looking behind, I see that we have strayed slightly upstream of the line between the white 'Cut across' bank marker and the next buoy. A crewman picks up the sounding*

Goliath water

*pole and frantically waves it in the air, trying to alert the helmsman. We continue on collision course. People are shouting and whistling now in deafening crescendo. Still nothing happens. Almost imperceptibly the stern starts to swing round — is it too late? In goes the sounding pole: one metre! In it goes again (all eyes now on that pole): no change. 'If we run aground here we'll be stuck for a month,' a man beside me mutters through clenched teeth. There's a slight exhalation as 1.1 is signalled ... then 1.5 ... two metres. The crewman puts the pole down, raises a clenched fist and sweeps it forwards twice: straighten up, you're back in the channel. The relief is tangible.*

**The dry season, I presume?**

We're on the home leg. My fade-out has worked; I'm feeling a bit better. But it seems that just as I am returning to the world of the living, many of my fellow-travellers are preparing to leave. And not without reason.

Take the weather, for example. Dry season? What dry season? It's been weeing down! The sky has become a rough-house in recent days, with most dawns and dusks seeing a weary sun squinting out through slits in black and purple cloud. We are north of the equator now, travelling at a time of year when — as everyone, from good-time-girl to missionary, has told us — the weather is fine and settled, and the river low. We discuss our flippant postcard to Martin; could this have something to do with it? Has someone in a celestial GCHQ intercepted and read it and decided to

have some fun? The river is certainly a lot lower than last year, but with cloud and rain streaming continuously out of the north-east (which it shouldn't be), for how much longer can this situation prevail? From the bows of a forward barge, Jeremy is mapping the river, reach by reach. I'm with him, pointing out a line of trees here, a scatter of rocks there. We have a grading system: rocks with deep, fast water running hard by, and unmistakable bwetas — grade 1; wooded banks with deep, fast water, and island heads and tails — grade 2; bushy banks with few in-water obstructions and adjacent, deepish water of moderate flow — grade 3; featureless channels, islets and sandbars — a lowly grade 4. He marks these places on page after page of an ever-growing map; we'll return to them in the coming weeks, and try the lot. I'm itching to get the rods out, I'll feel a lot better when I do.

Our fellow-travellers have suffered much. Gérard, Régina and all the others that we've met have told us, unequivocally, that this is the worst coche journey ever. It is easy to be smug after the event; to relive an experience through the soft-focus filter of memory, and re-edit it for home consumption. We are anxious not to, and sit and discuss the journey now: remembering the baby chimpanzee — snatched from its recently shot mother, sitting there traumatized on deck, sucking on a piece of sugarcane — that flung its arms around my neck when it first saw me; and the snotty-nosed human infants being made to endure things that would kill a Western child, just because there is no better means of transport here, and their parents must travel to live. I tell Jeremy of a sunlit cricket square in my youth, and of a resolve I made there, in June 1970, as I did last-minute revision for A-level exams. It was an idyllic day. I lay sprawled beneath a fine oak. Across the square the school First XI was playing Eton, and doing rather well. Polite clapping occasionally interrupted my flawed insights into *Hamlet.* I knew, immediately, then, that this was a scene I would never forget: I would take it with me, into my life, when I left the school in a few weeks' time. I was also aware of its power to influence the way I would feel about the time I had spent here, in years to come; that if I remembered my old school as the sunlit cricket square before me now, I would send a child of my own to it one day. But I forced myself, on that summer's afternoon twenty-one years ago, to transform a scene of beauty into a symbol of my loathing for a place that turned out affable, confident sorts who often took, but seldom gave. If ever the rosy spectacles of advancing age, for one moment, mellowed the intensity of my present hatred, I would remember the sunlit cricket square. With the coche, it is the same.

**Day 16 / Arrival**

We cast off in the dawn, and creep upriver beneath a sky doing its best to shake off a dark and murderous hangover. The coche would not go the distance yesterday; just a few miles short of the town and with the light fading, it had to tie up for another night against the shore. The disappointment, though not generally voiced, was tangible; I think you could have purchased despair by the machete-hacked piece. But we had seen a possible base for our operations earlier (or was it the day

before? Memory plays tricks when the brain has switched off every function not dedicated to self-preservation) — a large village, with fabulous water above and below. Grade 1 stuff we reckoned, and lots of it. We enquired after the village, and were given a name. We will make further enquiries on arrival.

Sometime in the last two or three days an event occurred that, were I writing in the British Kenya Remembered genre, could conveniently be called 'very African'. It was sometime in the middle of the day, and the coche's company was subdued; the majority lay steeped in pools of silent misery. Even the traders had lost their ebullient, crow-call repartee; repeated drenchings, and the reluctance of the river people to buy goods available cheaper in the town not far upriver, had sapped morale. Régina was feeding her baby, stirring a meal cooking on the stove, and calling 'Guy,' (her husband, above on the cabin roof) ... 'Oh Guyé ... Guyé!' in a gently rising crescendo of command, for him to leave his chattering male friends and come down and help. A similar scene was being enacted fifty times over, elsewhere on the coche. Then a yell went up, and pandemonium broke out; faces cracked into vaudeville-minstrel smiles; and two hundred rushed to the starboard side, or any high ground that afforded a glimpse of the river ahead. A repeated chorus of one word of Lingala soon became a second, in French: *'Hippopotame! Hippopotame!'* Jeremy was below. I yelled to him, and he was off his bunk, and up, and on the deck in seconds. A pair of blunt heads wheezed and snorted at the surface a hundred yards ahead. The crowd — to a man, woman and child — went crazy: it waved and pointed, shrieked and laughed. Then, like a pair of great pike-bungs, the heads popped under, disappeared for more than a minute, bobbed up again close to the shore well downstream of the coche (to further frantic cheering), sank once more, and were gone. The crowd drifted back to its quarters, smiles fading into looks of puzzled embarrassment at all the fuss. Its response, I felt, was not 'typically African' at all, but French: like their former colonial masters, the Congolese seize moments with great passion and joy, and generally lack the darker, introspective side of peoples once beneath an Anglo-Saxon yoke. This was the high spot of our more-than-week-long journey on the coche.

At the port, we give the crowd time to disembark and disperse. I sit on a capstan, feeling weak, wearing a fixed grin of farewell for those leaving the nursery deck. There is an end-of-term atmosphere. Jeremy is negotiating with the owners of several pirogues for a ride upriver to the hotel. A *'Monsieur Paul! Ça va?'* intrudes upon my last-gasp sociability. I turn, expecting to see a departing traveller wishing me luck, and find a smiling Armand — last year's young pinacier and motor freak. I smile and shake his hand; Jeremy comes over and does the same. Armand is astonished that we have come back; my French is not good enough to tell him that I am too.

Jeremy and I have the same thought, and are anxious to share it. We aside to each other in uncalled-for whispers of English. 'This could be our man,' one of us says.

'Yes,' says the other, 'we could put the plan to him.' (Our plan, made on the journey up, is to do an initial three-week session, downstream of the town — perhaps based at the village we liked the look of — followed, after a pit-stop for reprovisioning, by either a second trip down, or one to new waters upriver.) A bewildered Armand is asked to visit us tomorrow evening. He agrees, with a smile; I think he has sensed he might be made an offer.

Budget once again to the fore, we hire a leaky pirogue. It is handled with rare inexpertise by a pair of youths. We make a slow, erratic progress along the shoreline, passing the carcass of a metal boat with trees growing up through its crumbling ribs, the usual lines of washers, bathers, soon-to-be-derelict government speedboats, and local Jims and Peters taking on the great river with just handline and banana bait and no Mr Cherry or Mr Crabtree to act as a guide. On three occasions a perfectly healthy chest compels us to look away: to allow a beaming young woman to reach for a towel, or scrap of net, and regain her composure. *'Les pêcheurs anglais!'* I think I hear someone say. We're back all right.

There have been changes at the hotel. There is a new manager: a good sort and a hard worker. There are new curtains everywhere, and the floors are swept clean. In the garden, there is a newly dug well. Water is on a self-serve basis, a bucket and fifty feet of rope being provided. There are no other residents: with the scant air service down, any visiting official or business type must wait until it is restored, or come up on the first riverboat that water level permits. The town seems more cut off than ever. In our room, I fall onto the bed and collapse. There are still mosquitoes.

We go to the market, later. In the heat of the day most of its stalls are abandoned, but a Mauretanian shop is open. The young assistant remembers us, and asks after the third in our party. He is surprised when Jeremy tells him that Martin is in England, where we have been since leaving here; the man says he had imagined we lived in Brazzaville. We leave with a tin of meat paste and a box containing triangles of processed cheese: rare luxuries. A hunt for bread secures a few baguettes; we gorge one during the walk back. It's the first bread for over a week, and we can't get enough.

'Well! How *are* you guys?' says a smiling Becky as she shows us into the cool bungalow-interior. 'You said you'd be back, but somehow we ...' I interrupt, to remind her what they say about bad pennies. We laugh. She apologizes for Bill's absence, telling us he's away on church business till evening. A cry rises from a crib in a corner of the room. She goes over to it. 'And there's been this recent addition!' she says, lifting up a small giant — every bit her husband's son. Jeremy and I make appreciative noises.

'So Bill hasn't been doing much fishing, then?' I say. She gives me a look that conveys both girlish amusement and matronly disapproval.

'No — I mean yes! But with the river higher than it should be, fishing's been poor anyway. The local fisherman are catching nothing. Bill says there are no mbenga in

the market — very few fish of any kind. The weather has been really strange this year. Normally, we've got the big heat at this time, and hardly any rain. Last week a storm came over, tore up our vegetable garden and blew down the fence. We've had rain most days since.'

Jeremy tells her of the bad weather we experienced on the coche.

Before leaving, we learn that there is now another angler at the Mission, a pastor working among the neighbouring pygmy tribes. 'Paul will want to go out with you. He really wants to catch a benga. But his wife, Diane, had her baby much the same time as me — so he's grounded, too!'

She promises Bill will drop round to see us at the hotel. The two-kilometre walk back punishes me in my presently weakened, drugged-up state. But now, I tell myself, I have a strong incentive to get better.

**Day 18**

*Bill has invited us for an afternoon's fishing. It will be a good opportunity to catch up on news. But Paul is still very weak from his illness, and tells me to go without him. At the last minute he changes his mind. We unpack two rods and the two reels that are already loaded with line.*

*Towards the end of the afternoon we moor alongside the head of an island. Impeded by shallow water, the main current cuts powerfully across the river here, chiselling the coarse sand into a tall, sheer cliff. Bill says the island creeps, amoeba-like, several metres downriver each year. We are fishing into the slack on the outside of the top bend when — what's this? — my rod-tip nods and the reel gives out a whine reminiscent of an accelerating two-stroke motorcycle. I do a quick double-take, engage the clutch and pull back hard. Nothing happens; there is nothing on the end. I stand in silent confusion. Was I imagining it? After a pause, Paul says, 'It's broken you.' But it can't have done, certainly not in a situation like this. I turn the reel and the 17lb line comes in limply, minus all the terminal-tackle.*

*Then the reason hits me, like a blow between the eyes. I remember the previous swim we moored in. The current was very strong and I tightened the baitrunner clutch as far as it would go, to combat the drag of the water — but to no avail; I ended up fishing with a restraining finger on the spool* ... Only it wasn't the auxiliary clutch I tightened but the fighting clutch. *A thesaurus of expletives parades through my mind. Through the dark clouds I curse my stupidity: the fundamental mistake of not thoroughly familiarizing myself with an unfamiliar item of tackle. It's unforgivable. A good angler never loses fish through such crass human error.*

*Later, talking it through with Paul, and in slightly more charitable mood, I recognize that the episode goes deeper than we thought. It is a graphic illustration of the effect our journey here has had on us mentally — and the fact that we have not yet fully recovered. We have spent two weeks cultivating a state of almost total mental shut-down, and you simply can't snap out of it just like that.*

*But explaining it away doesn't mitigate the loss. We've come so far in search of this fish; and when I'm presented with our first opportunity I bugger it up in the worst way possible. Instead of the oblivion I long for, night brings a continuous visual rerun, in minutest detail, of the whole miserable chain of events, again and again and again....*

**Plans & preparations**

Yesterday afternoon Bill filled us in with a lot of information about outboard motors and their fuel consumption. He reckoned that for a three-week trip, based initially at the village fifty kilometres downriver, then possibly at another a further forty-five on, we'll need 175 litres of fuel. A small motor (of, say, six horsepower) will consume not more than seventy-five litres on the round trip. Add to this a generous five litres per day for local running, and 175 will easily be enough. Bill has some spare oil-drums and fuel reservoirs that he is willing to lend us, and knows of a new motor whose owner might be willing to hire. He cannot help us with a boat: last week's storm smashed the larger of the two Mission dug-outs at its mooring. We were advised, however, to take an ecumenical approach, and visit Père Jean. He has an eleven-metre metal pirogue laid up in his yard. Bill spoke of it in awed tones; I suspect he secretly covets the competition's vessels!

So this morning, before going to the market to see for ourselves the present dearth of fish and buy food and much-needed kerosene, we visit Père Jean. We find him at the rear of his church, with a Land Rover, standing — bare-chested, spanner in hand — in a hole dripping disconnected wires and pipes where an engine has recently been. This man of God is nothing if not versatile. He greets us with a smile, hands the wrench to an assistant, and offers (as the local people do in similar circumstances) the clean back of a grease-blackened hand to touch in token handshake. Jeremy exchanges pleasantries with him for several minutes, then poses the question. He receives an immediate *'Mais oui. Bien sûr!'* The boat is found lying in long grass and mimosa bushes. Ten minutes later, it is on a trailer; ten more sees it in the river across the road. We have a boat, and it's *perfect!*

When Père Jean leaves we remain by the river. I suggest that we name the boat *Water Dog* — after *Hydrocynus*, our quarry. Jeremy likes the idea. The boat, a fabrication of aluminium sheet welded around a box frame, is about a metre in the beam, has a shallow draft, a pointed bow and square stern. In short she's a partly decked punt-canoe hybrid with a liking for speed. Père Jean designed it himself, as a workhorse for these big waters. She's stable too — a perfect fishing platform. We could not have found better.

We are invited to lunch at the Mission, and, there, more than do justice to home-reared duck with rice. Bill tells us the outboard is ours — only a price has to be agreed. Then he reminds us that the river, though low, is more than a metre higher than it should be, and is slowly but steadily rising. Instead of having eight weeks' fishing at our disposal, we have perhaps four. Add to this the present scarcity of fish

(a consequence, he has heard, of the river not falling low enough to concentrate fish shoals in remaining pockets of deep water), and we have problems — but not as many as last year, I have to keep telling myself. I refuse to be intimidated by this river's moods and tantrums any longer; I'm going to have that fish. This silent resolve only helps fuel my appetite for a delicious dessert.

Back at the hotel we decide to siesta before paying the owner of the outboard a visit at five o'clock. I lie, trying to sleep, watching the crazed sun make a kaleidoscope of a floral curtain, listening to the sound of a machete trashing weeds in the garden beyond, a pair of ardent goats sharing a moment beneath our window, the snort and chomp of a big black pig that's scant generations away from the wild, and Jeremy pushing out zeds as only Jeremy can. Armand is arriving at four-thirty, to come with us to see the motor, then it's off to the market for a big shop — food for three weeks, a hurricane lamp, a machete made in Brazil ... so many things....

**Chapter Seventeen**

# Into the Lair

*Jeremy Wade* / Paul Boote

It is my firm opinion that a large Goliath is by all odds the most difficult fresh water fish to hook and land.

Leander J. McCormick, in *Game Fish of the World* (1949)

*Day 21 — Up before dawn. By seven-thirty, everything we need for the next three weeks is loaded and we're ready to go. Armand suggests that, instead of cutting across to the navigation channel, we conserve fuel by following the backwaters along the near bank. We agree. He calls to a pirogue coming the other way, asking if there's enough water. Yes, it's OK.*

*The boat glides easily across the surface. To our right is the abrupt scarp of the forest; on our left a high hump of orange sand, somewhere behind which, now out of sight, is the main river. Our watercourse funnels down to 100 metres across. We proceed cautiously; the bottom is visible for long stretches. In places we have to lift the motor and punt.*

*I dangle my hand in the cool water and quickly remove it. I remember the woman Bill told us about, who can sometimes be seen limping about the town, dragging her useless foot behind her. She was standing in the shallows washing, with an open cut on her calf. A goliath severed her Achilles tendon.*

*The backwater narrows further. Tall reeds crowd on both sides. We reach a T-junction: the vertical, shrub-hung head of an island faces us. We turn left. Turning down the island's flank, we recognize our mistake. This looks like the place where the riverboat channel (which we have now joined) does a double U-turn — yes, there's the 'Follow bank' marker pointing back the way we came. The channel we were about to enter, even though it starts out 200 metres wide and leads to a large village just visible in the distance, is actually a dead end. In just the last few years it has steadily filled with sand; not even pirogues can get through now.*

*The climbing sun licks our skins like a playful blowtorch, causing subcutaneous fat to sizzle. Hot sweat runs off my hands onto my notebook as I take the opportunity of mapping some of the sections blotted out by rain on the coche journey. But much of the water on our route, particularly the short cuts behind sand islands, is devoid of interest: too shallow and slow-moving. The main navigation channel starts to monopolize our thoughts.*

*The village we have earmarked as our preferred base stands, as do most of the permanent settlements in this water-permeated region, atop a high (six-metre) cliff of stony earth. We cut the motor and slide our nose onto the tapering foreshore. I pull on tracksuit trousers and T-shirt and follow Armand up a long, near-vertical flight of rough-cut steps. Paul stays in the boat to watch our stuff.*

*We emerge slightly out of breath into cool, spacious, bright shade. A cloister of low trees, backed by a thirty-metre-wide strip of swept, beaten pink earth, extends along the cliff top for 100 metres in either direction. Along the opposite edge of the clearing, backed by the foliage of the high forest, mud-walled huts face the river in a single orderly row.*

*A quiet, bearded man leads us along the cliff edge towards where an abrupt promontory spills porous-looking boulders into the dark water. The rock appears to be spontaneously generated from the hard red-brown earth. Four men sit in the shadow of a tree. One, slightly apart from the rest, is weaving basket traps; the others regard the panorama of the river.*

*They rise to greet us. Chairs are brought. We sit in relaxed silence, waiting. Presently we are joined by another man: fortyish, open faced, athletic-looking, wearing an immaculately clean olive-green overall. Armand nods at me: this is the chief.*

*Since French is not generally spoken nor understood in the villages (apart from the odd borrowed word or phrase), I introduce myself somewhat Janet-and-John-fashion in Lingala:* 'Nkombo na ngai Jérémie. Moninga na ngai atikali kati na bwato. Nkombo na ye Paul.' *My name is Jeremy. My friend stays in the boat. His name is Paul.*

*The bearded man asks if we come from the same village.*

'Te.' *No.*

*He asks if we are* français, *then* américain. 'Te, anglais.' *Blank looks all round, followed by thoughtful nods.*

*I say that we have come to Congo to look for fish, for mbenga. We would like to stay in the village. But my Lingala is not up to explaining why, exactly, we are fishing this far from home (it's hard enough in English) — beyond saying that, no, we are not planning to smoke the fish we catch for selling back home. Armand clarifies. From now on he is also our interpreter. 'They don't have mbenga in their country. They have come to study it, and take photographs to show other fishermen when they go home.'*

*While our papers are being inspected, Armand goes to bring the boat alongside. At the sound of the motor the men, suddenly knee-deep in children, go to the edge to watch its arrival. As the engine cuts I catch the chief's quiet command:* 'Kamata biloko na bango.' *Go and get their things. A tidal wave of cheering children pours down and engulfs the boat; two minutes later everything is neatly installed in the front room of a large hut. Paul and I survey the scene and exchange grins. Something already tells us that we have stumbled on a rather special place here.*

*The chief (whose hut this is) tells us that the people of his village fish only with nets, catching, mainly, various species of carpe. But yes, there are lots of mbenga here; you often see them strike right in front of the village. As if to confirm this we hear a sudden cry from down by the rocks: a small boy dangling a handline (something small boys do even in 'nets only' villages) has just had a small fish grabbed and lacerated. We cannot get started fast enough.*

*But first we must catch bait, and to do that we need worms. We motor to a stagnant bay some way downstream, where we clear an area of mint-like herb with the machete before delving in the knee-deep ooze. The waterlogged roots are crawling with them: like double- and triple-length versions of our own nightcrawlers. In less than half an hour a stringy knot is writhing in the bottom of our old porridge tin.*

*Armand has identified a place that should be good for small fish: a shrub-hung island, banks punctuated by fallen trees, that stands opposite the village's lower extremity. Here, fishing the fringes of some semi-sunken bushes immediately below the bones of a drowned tree, we quickly collect a good mixed bag of mokobe, soso, mboto, one-spot likoko and soso-drapeau.*

*There are also predators moving here. Now that we are quietly established we see a series of surface slashes along the water margin: almost certainly tomba. Further out, over deep water, the occasional quiet bulging of the surface betrays the presence of what are probably carpe of some sort, or possibly big catfish.*

*Then suddenly behind us, upstream, there is a loud, watery* Whoosh! *Three heads whip round to see a spreading ring of waves, its foamy epicentre adjacent to a jutting finger of bleached wood. Goliath! Hearts quickening, we untie and drift downstream before quietly arcing round to a point above the strike.*

*We each rig up a floatfished livebait, weighted to swim a couple of feet below the surface: surely an irresistible target for an active marauder. The large cigar-shaped floats drift down, chugging this way and that, towards the beckoning branch. Trembling fingers click ratchet buttons to the 'on' position, restraining the baits in the danger zone. Nothing happens: either the fish has moved on or he is no longer hungry. Or he has more grey matter than he's generally credited with. We extend the scope of our search. Paul anchors a float-paternostered livebait on the edge of some branches. I put a deadbait on the bottom. There is no response. At a quarter to five we reel in and head homeward, via a large, low sand island in front of the village, where we have a quick wash in the brief twilight.*

*In the absence of anything more substantial for supper we eat the remainder of the bait. Armand unwraps a pat of peanut butter (the alternative flavour to tomato) from its banana leaf wrapping and mixes it into a runny paste. The resulting bouillon, despite being ninety-five per cent bones, is excellent.*

**Day 22**

*Woken by Armand at four, asking for the key to the chain on the boat — something about waves (I can't hear anything) and the need to do some 'arranging'. The storm*

*arrives one hour later. Starting as a low, distant moan, the wind comes howling off the river, crashes through the trees, and piles into the hut with a blow that makes its bones creak. For the next four hours the the tin roof buckles under a cascade of cats, dogs, gorillas, elephants, hippopotamuses and mokele-mbembes.*

*We eventually slither down to the river at nine-thirty, to be met by the boat tranquilly nestling inside a cluster of sturdy posts at the chief's mooring. The water inside is ankle-deep.*

*Despite the late start, our mood is the brew of anticipation and fear that hot-wires a cold brain on the bank of a Kaveri rapid. We're heading for a stretch upstream where the navigation channel passes for several hundred metres alongside a continuous rocky bank. Alternating points and bays create a long, long strip of deep, turbulent water. It was this stretch (and one downstream), seen from the coche on our way up, that made us choose this village.*

*The small fish share our apprehension. After an hour only a couple of soso have reluctantly agreed to take part in proceedings. Unwilling to delay any longer we consign small fillets of these to the depths. Almost immediately there's a response. Paul has a fast pull which abruptly stops. I have a series of sharp knocks that, instead of getting more enthusiastic, gradually peter out. I reel in to find my hook cleaned. Paul's tackle is embedded in the first of many snags. The anchor is also snagged. After nearly sinking the boat in our motorized attempts to free it, the rope breaks.*

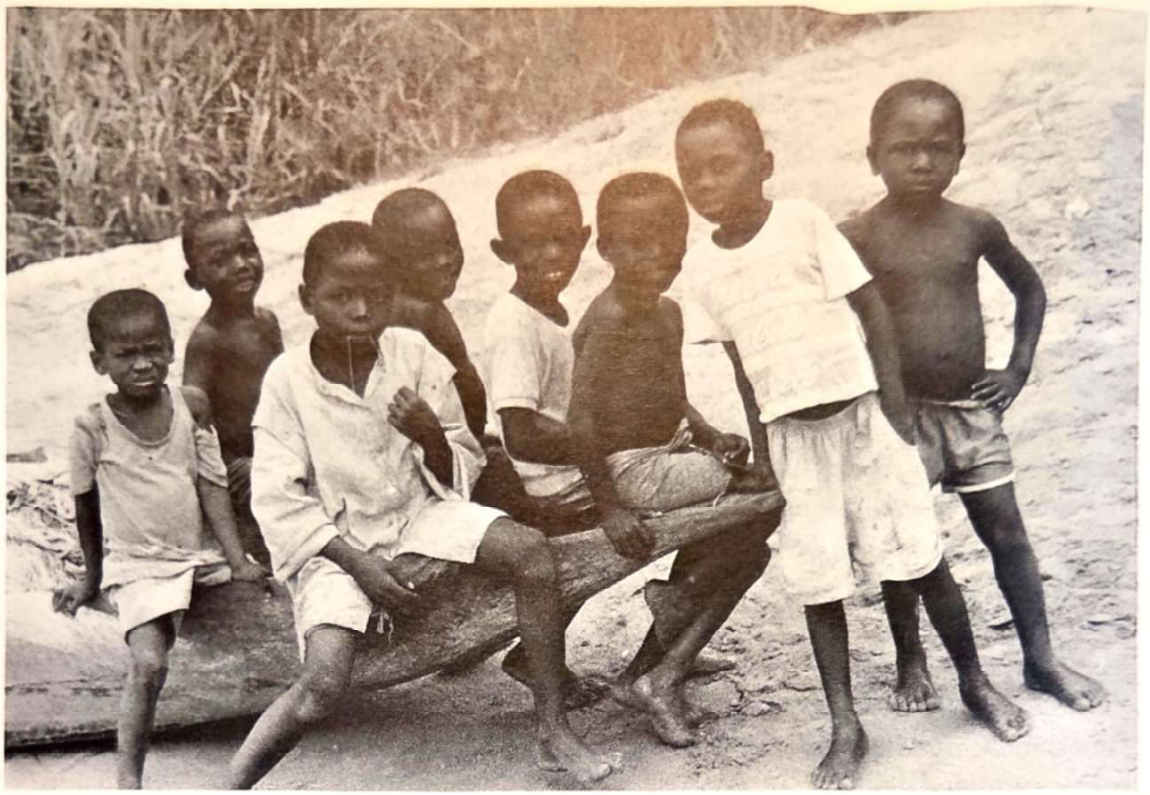
*We continue downstream, fishing the edge of the fast water. (Further out even four ounces of lead will not hold bottom.) We experience several more cautious pulls, none of which develops into anything more positive. In some exasperation, I decide to whack the next thing that moves. Result: a* machoiron *catfish of about a pound. We voice what we'd both silently suspected. We're in the wrong place. But where is the right place?*

*In the evening gloom I'm washing plates when one of the village boys approaches. 'There are people living in that tree,' he says. I ask which one. He points to a white-trunked shadow on the cliff edge. 'Sometimes you can hear their voices....'*

**Day 22 — take 2**

The tackle came out yesterday afternoon. Suddenly, it was Christmas: reels by Abu, Scientific Anglers and Shimano, with drags to tame a runaway train; slender graphite rods by Sage and Graham Phillips; high-carbon, handmade hooks by Partridge of Redditch (my special favourites); lines by Cortland and Dupont; dangerously alluring plugs by Rapala of Finland; and a legion of terminal-tackle bits — cabled wire, beads, and glittering razors that a label claims are O'Shaughnessy hooks — from Drennan of Oxford ... an array assembled over the years (bought, begged, but never stolen) and certain to make most anglers drool, and fish swim in fear for their lives.

We took some of it down to the river, impressing a dozen children on the way; the men of the village remained at a distance, faces inscrutable in the shadows,



*Fledgling net-fishermen at our first village*

repairing and making their traps. We blanked, beautifully.

Today we go upriver, to the 'grade 1' water a few hundred yards above the village. Here the riverboat channel runs twenty-odd-feet deep past a rocky, wooded bank. We drop anchor, and put out lumps of fish on 8/0 hooks, having had more artfully presented whole baits declined in perfectly good 'grade 3' water yesterday afternoon. Soon, what we suspect to be gurk-gurks are savaging the baits with persistent, irritating knocks. We hold our rods at first, hearts thumping, ready for a take to develop which, for all we know, might differ radically from Dr Gillet's promised rush. (I looked at my photocopy of McCormick's goliath chapter, at the hotel the other day, and realized the enormity of our task here; I soon put it away.)

The old engine flywheel that Bill gave us for an anchor is lost in a sunken tree. Our confidence goes with it. We head upstream, to seek the source of the water we can hear burbling in this oddly quiet, muted world, and find a stream running out of the forest, cool, clear and dark, with water the colour of old tea draining from a samovar. Anglers know that fish often gather below such outfalls to feed; we come in to the bank.

Earlier, Jeremy's machoiron had confirmed a diagnosis of catfish plague. Since then substantial tackle losses in a rocky bottom have further nibbled away at our sense of well-being. Now, moored at the stream mouth, biteless, I know that something is wrong. It is not the place — this particular spot, or even this length of

bank — it's more fundamental than that: we are fishing the wrong type of water. I voice my conviction.

'They're not here, Jeremy. This deep dark water is catfish country — I can *feel* it. A fish may cruise through a place like this, but I'm *certain* it lives and feeds elsewhere. This is dead water — like at Bommasandra on the Kaveri ... you've seen the catfish there. This place feels all wrong.'

Jeremy agrees, but counsels that we fish on — to be absolutely certain. I concede, and sit swatting mosquitoes and looking about, ignoring my rod lying on the gunwale. Armand is catching deep-water species like soso; the boat is filling up fast with bait, but we have nothing to use it on.

Then something happens that makes me yell in outrage and astonishment. Far across the river, a fish moves. Moves? No — that's far too sedate — it *explodes.* In all my years of fishing, *never* have I seen, or heard, such a violent slash. Big rainbow trout, laying into newly hatched Mayfly on the point of take-off, will burn images of their vigour into an angler's memory; this smash and grab is no different, but multiplied twenty-fold. I turn and cry '*That's* where they are, Jeremy!' Suddenly, I'm well again.

We look across, pinpoint the spot, and begin an analysis. That fish took its meal about forty yards out from the opposite bank. (Here, 'opposite bank' means the right-hand edge — looking downstream — of an exposed sandbar that extends for hundreds of yards towards the forested left bank. This left bank, Jeremy learned last night, is merely the right bank of a long island; in the wet season there is a lot of water behind it.) The fish had moved in steadily deepening water, where the riverbed shelves away from the bar. It probably took on the edge of the shelf, where a depth of perhaps twelve feet falls away into the beginnings of the deep-water channel that runs along our shore. That goliath (Armand says it couldn't have been anything else) was over sand, in the sun, and well over a hundred yards from the nearest cover — our bank. Was it just a cruiser? Where did it come from? Pondering yet another set of questions, we return for lunch.

**Day 23**

No rain last night, so I was spared another soaking by water driven horizontally through the hole in the hut wall.

We have been told about the benga that patrol the deep water in front of the village; they are often to be seen striking on the surface forty yards out from the rocky spur at the downstream end of the canoe moorings — a sixty-yard down-and-across diagonal from where we keep the boat. A float-paternoster, in the style of the local fishermen but with refinements of our own (a cigar-shaped styrene float, for example, replacing the five-litre jerrycan!), greatly appeals to me — anything to avoid the brain death of endlessly legering static gore. I want to anchor a small fish, six feet below the surface of a twenty-five-foot depth of water, and see what goes for it. The smooth, eddying table by the mooring seems an ideal place. We set off

early, and cross to the bushy midstream island just down from the village, to catch bait, and prepare.

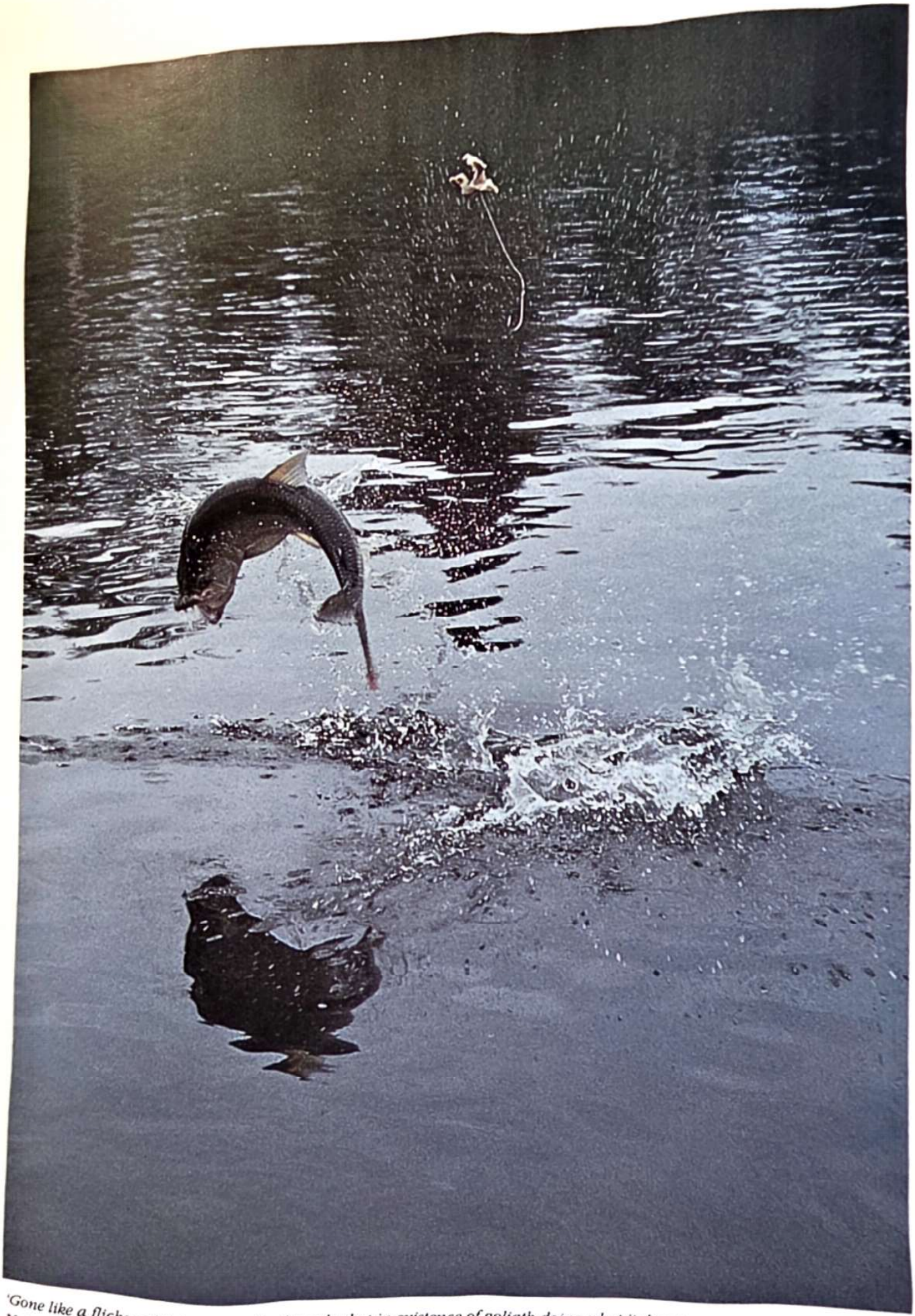
The baitfish are wary. We catch slowly, and place fine mokobe into the meshes of an enormous, fifty-two-inch-arm, triangular landing net made by a man I know in Essex. I had said to this singular sort, 'It will land a hippo!' In muscular English he had replied that he expected nothing less, and would I be replacing the mesh with fencing wire? I'd told him I would let him know.

The sun is blistering today. Everything is glare: sky, water, metal boat. It's too hot for sweat to remain on the skin; we just bake. I rig up two rods with paternoster tackles: stop-knot on the line first, then a small bead, an eight-inch sliding float, a yard of 66lb wire with a swivel at each end and one in the middle, to the bottom ring of which is snapped a link-swivel connected to eighteen inches of wire and a 6/0 hook. To the bottom-most swivel of the long trace (which will hang vertically in the water to prevent a fish from biting through the 30lb reel line as it takes the bait), eighteen feet of much weaker nylon is tied, and on the end of this goes a four-ounce lead. By the village, we will stop the boat forty yards out, and each gently drop lead, bait and float over the side. Then we will ease shoreward, paying out line to the anchored floats as we go. Once on dry land, we'll be fishing, and can sit and relax. Heaven knows, we need to.

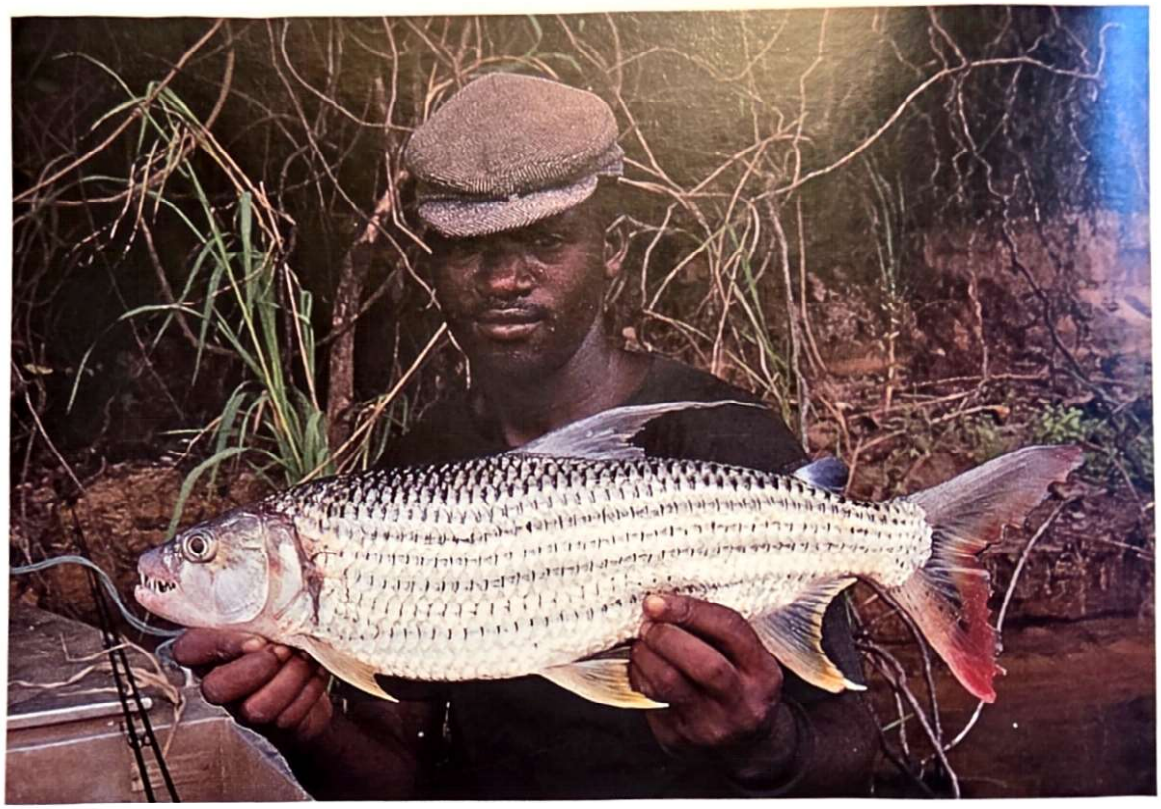
It is midday by the time we have caught enough bait to fish the moorings and an as yet undecided location this afternoon. As we near the village, we are in full view of the chief and other men sitting making basket traps in the shade of the fine trees that lie atop the low cliff immediately above our destination, the rocky spur. In addition, some children and a few young women come out from huts and stand along the cliff top to watch us come in. Armand is on the motor, having been well briefed by Jeremy a few minutes before. He knows what he has to do now, but is not doing it. Instead he stops the boat with a boy-racer turn, picks up the bait rod and belts out a two-swanshot link-leger across the current into nearly thirty feet of water: he's playing to the audience. I see what he's doing, and growl. Jeremy speaks to him. He only half stops. I wrestle some more with the waiting tackles. 'Let's have the bait now, Jeremy,' I say. We look down the boat, to where the net holding the fish lies draped over the gunwale. It's not there. Armand looks sheepish. We drift to shore in bloody confusion. I storm off. The crowd parts before a man from whom one look would kill.

It's a blinder. I'm in the worst paddy since a guest refused to give me back my new crossbow at my seventh-birthday party. Jeremy and Armand have fled to the hut, to seek cover; I'm sitting on the cliff, looking out at the river; I can hardly see it for rage, yet, at the same time, am finding it difficult to keep a straight face. We've been WAWAed — the expatriates' acronym for West Africa Wins Again, meaning 'nothing, here, ever goes as planned' — yes, WAWAed, Central African style. Martin would *love* it!

A *slosshh!* on the river surface, thirty yards out from our moored boat, has me on



*'Gone like a flicker of light.' Probably the only shot in existence of goliath doing what it does best. Note secondary hinge in upper jaw*



*Armand with tomba. Note horizontal bars and long, soft dorsal ray*

*Attempting to tickle goliath, as one does trout, is not recommended*

my feet and across the sand towards the hut before the ripples have died away. In little over a minute I'm at the water's edge, spinning rod in hand. At the end of the wire trace I find the silver Magnum plug I had clipped on earlier, and punch it forty yards, well past the back of the boat. I crank the reel fast a dozen times before everything goes solid; I don't seem to be able to turn the handle any more. I look up, puzzled, and see the rod-tip go down and the surface mirror before me heave itself skyward and shatter into glistening fragments. In the midst of them is a fish, and it's very angry. It tears fifteen yards off the reel, before blowing up the river close to the rocks. By now I'm yelling to Jeremy to bring a camera. He doesn't appear, but about half the village does instead. I lay into the fish, hard: I'm using 25lb line and the rod which landed the fifty-two-pounder on the Ganges. The fish comes to shore. It's a tomba, a *forskahlii* tigerfish, all horizontal stripes, old silver, and mustard-and-orange fins — our first tiger of more than eleven inches. At the hut, it pulls round the scale to five and a half pounds. I tell Jeremy that if I had lost this fish after its first demented leaps, I would have put it at ten or fifteen pounds: it moved too quick for human vision, and had that undefinable, double-figure power. I think these fish must be on something.

The afternoon is spent in exploration. We drift the right bank of the midstream island first, fan-casting plugs towards stands of fallen timber. Undaunted by a lack of response we echo-sound the upper end of the island next, find deep water and a hole here, then follow the current that rakes past the feature, over to the second island — the far left bank as we look out from the village. We find the deep water that a villager promised us earlier, and two campements several hundred yards apart. As Armand steers with a paddle in the stern, we drift to the second campement, watching the depth on the sounder-screen shallow from thirty-two to eighteen feet. With a six-weight fly rod and tinselly streamer, Jeremy takes a *bomaka* from beside a line of bushes, then I catch a splendid, leaping mokobe right in front of the campement mooring. The inhabitants, mostly women and boys, look down and give us approving smiles.

Then time is spent legering deadbaits in deep water, and drinking tea. A man in a pirogue goes past; he's a bit of a motor-mouth, and yells something to us about looking out for ferocious animals at the spot we are fishing. Finally, deep-running plugs are trolled back up the shoreline. We return, sunbaked and fishless, in the dusk.

Later, sitting in the lamplight inside the hut, feasting on chunks of fried tomba, we make more plans.

**Day 24**

*Coffee on at six. Sky to east dark. 'It will rain all day,' says a passing old man. We dash down to the rocks with two plug rods, and both snag within a few casts. We run back inside to sit out the rain.*

*8.00 — Clear sky! We take off for the other stretch that caught our eye on the coche: deep water, lots of sunken trees. On the way we try for bait in a small bay. The fly I dunk in the water prior to casting is immediately seized by a small bomaka of about twelve ounces, a handsome, wide-mouthed, straight-backed surface-feeder with a worrying habit of spontaneously falling apart — shedding its large, nacreous scales at the slightest provocation.*

*We move on. It's difficult to know where to start — so a good time to unearth the echo-sounder. In accordance with the navigation markers, the deep water is indeed right alongside the bank. Twenty feet is not uncommon just a boat-length out. We find two holes of twenty-nine and thirty-one feet. But the imagined profusion of fish fails to materialize on the screen. The only exceptions are two medium-sized blips that appear in midwater as we traverse the up-boiling at the centre of the deeper hole. A jagged trace below them indicates a forest of snags. We opt to fish midwater baits anchored in position by ten-foot links of weak line. Nothing happens. The tree we are barking up is not the one frequented by our water dog.*

*It's time to forget preconceptions and ask the villagers.*

*Somebody could be reading our minds. Back at the village we've got our faces inside huge slabs of pineapple when Maurice, the old man with the deformed foot (who told us yesterday always to look for deep water), presents us with a large aluminium bowl containing a somewhat torn net. It's about eight foot deep with a two-inch mesh: too fine to work as a gill net for big fish, but he says via Armand that mbenga will get itself wrapped up in it — also capitaine, of which there are a few big ones around. We thank him for the offer but explain we're only interested in catching mbenga with hooks. To this he laughs and says something I don't fully understand, but whose general message seems to be, 'You're welcome to try!'*

*Then an abrupt transformation. His voice rises to a shout. 'Mbenga is THE BIGGEST FISH, THE STRONGEST FISH,' he spits at me several times. He barks out another laugh. But his eyes are not laughing; with whites aglow beneath a filmy red glaze, they hold me as if on a spike. At a loss how to respond, I flick a glance at Armand for some clue. This is no help. He is leaning back languidly in his chair, hands intertwined behind his head, eyes narrowed to slits, and a smile playing over his thinly moustached lips. The mechanic from the big town is making little attempt to conceal his amusement at this ranting bumpkin. I grope for an appropriate reply.*

'Nayebi,' *I say. 'I know.'*

*Maurice continues, but his babble now loses me. He makes repeated rapid waving gestures with his downward-pointing right hand; he sets his jaw and mimes pulling on a rope. I ask Armand to explain.*

*Still smirking, he replies, 'The old man says he can make mbenga come to him. He puts his hand in the water like this and waves it about. Then you throw in a piece of cut fish — no float, no weight — and hold on very tight. If you don't, you will be pulled in.'*

*A bit later, Maurice comes back with his credentials: an eighteen-inch length of wood, notched at either end, round which is wound twenty yards of thick cord. The cord's free end is doubled back and crudely braided with a much folded length of stiff wire to form a thick, twelve-inch trace. The wire passes through the eyes of two large black single hooks. Though it all has something of the look of a family heirloom, Paul and I agree that once it must have earned its keep. Maurice notes our approval. We are on the threshold of something here.*

*Through Armand I ask just where near the village we will find mbenga. Maurice gestures vaguely over his shoulder. 'The other side — very deep water.' It's too far to go this afternoon so I ask about the nearby island where we saw the first strike. 'Yes, they are there. But go downstream from the sunken trees.'*

*Three o'clock sees us in place, two fish chunks resting on the bottom thirty-five yards downstream. It's water I had classified as 'grade 3' on my notebook map: quite deep (we're in the navigation channel), flowing, but otherwise unremarkable. The steep banks are clad in half-submerged shrubby vegetation. The riverbed appears to be clean.*

*Almost immediately, the gurk-gurks begin their sharp, intermittent tap-tap-tapping. One knock is more substantial: line is ripped from Paul's loose clutch, but the rod's answering sweep meets no resistance.*

*Then, shortly after four, it happens: a screamer of a take — unmissable. I pick up the rod, engage the clutch, and strike. Twenty-five yards from where the bait had been, something like a submarine-launched missile breaks the surface. An eye-blink later the vision has vanished, the reel is silent and the line is slack. I wind like mad but the fish has gone.*

*Paul tells me he is shaking so much he can hardly bait up. I feel oddly emotionless. Unlike the fish I broke on when we were with Bill, this time I did everything right. It was a random loss. (And we saw this one: at about ten pounds it was no monster.) After all the doubts of the last few days, the overriding feeling is that goliath is within our grasp.*

**Day 26**

So, it appears that the slope of a drop-off into deep (but, perhaps, not too deep?) sandy-bottomed water is the answer. Goliath, as I suspected, does not frequent the dark, rocky horror of catfish country, spending its time skulking in the shadows with things that go grunt and burp, but is pelagic, a patroller of the sunlit channels that run past bushy banks — like the one in which we moved fish yesterday afternoon, and are motoring towards now. It's seven a.m., and I suspect that, overnight, Dali and Magritte were duelling in paint to make this morning sky. Its blue is deepest cerulean, its clouds ten thousand variations upon a theme of white; their draftsmanship is faultless. A sightless person could *feel* this sky.

With baits in the water by eight, we submit ourselves to the sun's scrutiny for thirty-five minutes before line begins to trickle from my reel. I drop the rod-tip, wind down quickly and strike at the slow-running fish. I fail to connect, and wind in. My line must have picked up debris: the retrieve is fractionally more onerous than the one I made after an initial miscast. A length of water-hyacinth appears at the surface a few yards astern. When swung to hand, it becomes a 3½-pound goliath tigerfish with a hard-driven hook through its skull. Jeremy and I give one another expressionless looks. I despatch the fish with the back of the machete, and throw it into the bilges. As I prepare a new bait, Jeremy's rod goes. He's on the point of hitting a hard-running fish, when it stops abruptly. Dark muttering is heard when he retrieves a bare hook. A few minutes later, with Jeremy's new bait barely back in the water, my rod goes again. I snatch the strike, and miss dismally. The bait, a six-ounce lump of mokobe, has gone. We drift down, tie up to the protruding branch of a sunken tree (one of only a few along this bank) and roll baits round the channel, to settle at the base of the submerged shelf that runs from the island shore. My reel *screams*; it's ratchet burn-out stuff. I hit the run ... and don't feel a thing. I yell an obscenity that must be heard in the village, half a mile away. As I rebait, I watch Jeremy beside me gently grinding his teeth, and Armand suddenly all eyes for the mokobe shoal priming in front of him.

After a half-hour wait, and with the sun nearing its zenith, my reel goes into a screaming fit. I'm up and crouched and about to strike, when it stops. I sit back down, saying something (borrowed from the elegant pen of Roderick Haig-Brown) to the effect that these fish are sufficiently difficult to be interesting. What I really say, to the gods that look down from a boundless and enduring sky, is both crude and unimaginative.

After a couple of minutes my reel goes again, and I hit the run hard. Seventy yards away, out in the channel, something silver flings itself four feet clear of the water, touches down and begins to run. I make the rod-ferrule creak in an effort to stop it, and soon am pumping a fish back towards me. It resists well; Jeremy tells me it has leapt a second and a third time; I'm too busy applying murderous pressure to count. The fish plays deep for a time, close in. Then, on hearing my 'Okay,' Jeremy slips in a gaff under the chin, lifts the fish aboard, and brandishes it at me.

'Caught the bastard. Boiled or fried?' I say, straight-faced.

The mask on Jeremy's face cracks into a grin. Some seconds pass before my own does the same.

Back at the village, as I present the eleven-and-a-half-pound goliath to the chief, in thanks for his hospitality, a man stops to inspect the rods.

To celebrate, we are going to spend a lazy afternoon on the sandbar opposite the village. The up-at-dawn back-in-the-dusk bed-after-food routine of recent days has left us badly in need of a wash. I'm waiting at the boat; the others have yet to arrive. But for a small boy washing pots and pans, I am alone on the shore. The boy is

crouched in the margins of a shallow bay; he has his back to the river. As I watch him, I see the unruffled surface of the bay split by a darting arrow that quickly finds a target in a lusty swirl six feet short of the sand, sending fish scattering in frantic leaps for deep water and a terrified boy to land. I cover thirty yards to get within casting range, raise a hand to bid him remain, then throw. Six turns of the reel handle bring the plug out of the current and into the bay; six more provoke a hot pursuit. Then a fish is on and up and out and back into the main current with a continuous tail-spinning leap; leaving me with a well-mauled plug, an opened hook, and a lasting memory of what a really good-sized tomba can do. I lower my rod in salute.

We set off. On the way, I ask Jeremy to repeat exactly what Rufin had told him about the feeding habits of goliath. He begins to tell me of how benga visit village waterfronts in the early morning, to feed on the waste generated by fishermen cleaning their catch — but I cut him short. 'They don't just come in for the offal, Jeremy,' I say, excitedly, 'they come for the breakfasters, too! The tomba I just turned was a practised raider. If the villagers here were bringing in fish every morning, I'd be out tomorrow — with the big fly rod and a five-inch streamer — waiting. *Imagine it!*'

*14.00 — Down to the boat, planning to wash, shave, and wash clothes on the big sand island that faces the village. No sign of Paul. Then I see his silhouette a long way along the bank. In a scene from a film without a soundtrack, a big swirl appears right in front of him. His rod hoops into a semicircle then catapults back. He returns with his mackerel-patterned plug sporting multiple punctures and the wire trace filmed with slime where the fish kicked. 'Bloody big tomba! Right where the women wash their clothes — about ten pounds I reckon,' says a voice two octaves above its normal level. But even at such close range the hooks made no impression. We boggle at how mere flesh and blood can have such contempt for sharp steel.*

*We motor to the near, downstream corner of the sandbank, where we beach the boat and refresh clothes and bodies in the steeply shelving margins. The billowing sand stretches a long way upriver, disappearing into haze. For half the year, at least, this is the bottom of the river. To the west, the sand appears to meet the far bank (the narrow bankside channel is not visible from here). On the village side it tapers in a ragged line towards the deep water of the navigation channel.*

*Looking downriver, the water runs clear but dark. Deep. The current, scouring right-to-left between us and the shrubby island, eighty yards away, is swift — surprisingly so, considering that the navigation channel continues straight ahead, along the island's right flank.*

*I noted yesterday that it has the feel of a fishing spot here, but couldn't work out why. Perhaps the block lies in our preoccupation with the navigation channel. It is, after all, merely the shortest obstacle-free route with adequate depth for riverboats. It is not necessarily the deepest water, nor the only deep water. And though it mostly*

*coincides with the main flow, it will not do so always. (In fact, it will if possible avoid current that is too strong.) A memory is struggling to surface ... the place where I lost the fish with Bill ... In terms of basic topology, I suddenly realize, this is a mirror-image. Both places are S-bends of fast water flanked by deep slacks. I suggest we put out baits for a while.*

*Our casts are torn away by the flow. We have to run out a lot of line to prevent them being pushed straight back into the side. The baits end up somewhere on the outside of the second bend, but still very close to the sand — our lines run almost parallel with the bank. Looking up from my rod, which I have wedged in the boat, I see that Armand has walked downstream with the tiddler-catching rod and is almost on top of where the baits are. I am about to call him back when I decide against it. He has become part of the landscape, heron-like. Besides, we are only fishing semi-seriously while our clothes dry; we'll come back another time to do it properly. In this spirit, Paul wanders upriver with the plug rod. I explore the area just up from the boat with a fly, fished on a short tip of single-strand wire.*

*Repeated casting of the fly, under the hot sun, brings on a state approaching self-hypnosis, in which the last sound one would expect to hear is the scream of high-revving machinery. I drop the fly rod and run. My other rod has become possessed — twitching violently and spitting, it defies me to go near it. I seize the grip beneath the reel, engage the clutch, then — a reflex from my early days of long-range carp fishing — sweep it overhead like a cast to the opposite horizon while simultaneously starting to sprint up the sand.*

*A silver shape, cloaked in spray, appears a long way upstream from where it has any right to be. Warning bells jangle: there will be a huge belly of slack between rod and hook — what I feel is not the fish but the weight of water on line. I keep running until, thirty yards back, the fish stops me. It turns downstream and arcs across the current, pulling like a kite in a gale — tugging me towards the water. But as the rod kicks in my hands and my feet kick through the ember-hot sand, the clutch stays silent. I start to force line back on the spool.*

*Paul appears, breathless, behind me with camera. Right on cue, just ten yards in front of us, the surface shatters. A snarling head emerges, followed by an endless silver body flexing from side to side. The photograph of a lifetime. From somewhere behind me comes a squawk. The next thing I know, Paul has rushed past me and jumped into the shallows, and is hopping from foot to foot. 'I bloody missed it!' he gibbers. 'My feet were about to ignite!' Insult is then added to injury: the line cuts up through the water a second time and the fish does an encore. The next time it emerges is when Paul hooks the gaff into its chin and (wet footed) runs back with it onto the sand. Just as I'm wondering if I'll ever see either of them again, he stops. The fish is well and truly landed.*

*It's not until more than two hours later, motoring back from a surprise rendezvous with a descending coche (a chance to replenish kerosene, which has nearly run out), that I'm hit by the emotional delayed reaction. My face starts to ache with cramp.*

The boys from the fishing camp opposite our village display a 34lb suni taken on a long-line. Two days later we hooked its great-great-grandmother

*We've caught our first big fish: just a pound and a half short of forty.*

*Back at the dark village, Armand precedes us with the fish as I lock up the boat. Then a wonderful, touching thing: the spontaneous bursting into song of all the children, who come dancing to meet us. Their joy and excitement fill the air. Everyone gathers as we present the fish to the chief, for dividing amongst the village families. In the background, illuminated by the lamp-glow, Maurice's face is smiling. The strange foreigners no longer feel like strangers.*

**Unacceptable losses**

We had a good day yesterday, there's no denying it; but I'm still smarting from the lash of ill-fortune. Missing the shot of the leaping fish, for example. There I was, standing at least six feet above Jeremy, peering over his shoulder; seeing, through the viewfinder, a well-bent rod, a waiting expanse of smooth water and the angle of the line quickly shallowing, and knowing that the fish was about to jump. And I was ready: faithful old Pentax on 1/1000th of a second, zoom wide at 35mm, aperture at f16, opened half a stop to compensate for background glare — ready to take a photograph I have had in my head for years ... And what happens? My feet burn up a millisecond before the monster clears the water by several feet!

We caught fish yesterday, but we also lost them. If the morning offered scenes from farce, the afternoon yielded ones of dark comedy. I have not told Jeremy what happened when he and Armand left to chase the descending coche; I have been

trying to forget. Better out than in ... Captain's Log:

I hold the rod at first, then, lacking any sort of rest, lay it on the ground, with the multiplier on a T-shirt, away from the terrible sand. Sat comfortably at last, I remember Jeremy's fish on the beach, behind; it should be in the shade. I get to my feet, and have gone no distance when the reel gives a single *click*. That's all, one click. I ignore it; it's happening all the time here, the weight of water on a long line being the cause. I drag the fish over, and wash it in the shallows. I jump when the reel gives another *click-click*. It's like the prelude to the rod-and-line take in *Jaws*! I heave the fish ashore, pick the rod up, hold it dutifully for several minutes, then put it down again and stare down the bright channel. I just wish I could find my sunglasses. I have not been looking long when a fish leaps, sixty yards below; it's *vast* — sixty, seventy pounds — like a pig. My reel makes a simultaneous squawk. I look down, and find the spool a lacemaker's lament. Later, I strike into a fish of twenty pounds. I know it's twenty, for the fish puts its head above the surface for a long second, and rinses its mouth. My hook falls out. And, when the others get back, it happens again. Another twenty-pounder becomes dizzily airborne without being struck. (Jeremy knows about this one!) These fish are *definitely* on something. Tonight I'm going to make a rig so deadly, that if a fish so much as farts within three feet of it, he's a gonner!

This morning, the new rig — a 6/0 treble hook with a branch sawn off to make it into a double — sits on the bottom of thirty feet of water, as we fish the centre of the riverboat channel just upstream from the village. Lacking an anchor now, we are tied to a marker buoy. Armand, keen as ever, is fishing for bait. His 1½-ounce bomb and worm lie way downstream. Sport is slow; then, one after the other, he retrieves two tiny fish; both are living with bite wounds that have nearly cut them in half. 'There's absolute *carnage* going on down there, Jeremy!' I exclaim. 'Nothing is safe here — except perhaps hippos, crocs and big catfish!' He nods, and laughs.

Fishless we return for coffee, then cross to the island head — the short, right bank of what we have begun to call The Channel. Jeremy fails to hook up soon after arrival. I catch an eight-pound tomba from the deep hole we found the other day. The well-hooked fish, which has a long dorsal front ray extending almost to the adipose fin, makes a fine bouillon for supper.

**Day 29**

*The boys from the fishing camp are going to show us a place where (they say) a nightline was retrieved with its wire trace bitten through. We go some way down the far side of the shrubby island and tie to a fallen tree. Not a touch. Except from a huge swarm of tiny black flies that cover our skins, get in our hair, up our noses, everywhere. The outing develops into a trial. We meet an old man who tells us we should go to the 'big town' downstream. ('You'll get tired of catching mbenga there.')*

*This, and the general tailing off of activity here, catalyses the decision to move tomorrow — with the usual proviso: weather permitting.*

*Afternoon — We stop off at the sand island. Paul has a fast run before I have even set up, but makes only momentary contact. Gradually we move down-current but there are no more takes. The chief joins us for a brew, on his way home from somewhere round the far side of the island, with a couple of near-double-figure monganza on the floor of his small canoe. He's just about to drink when he puts down his mug and points to the darkening sky.* 'Pardon,' *he says in French, getting hastily to his feet. Then in Lingala, 'I'm going to the village. There's wind coming.' We finish our coffee quickly and decide to follow. Our larger boat is not so vulnerable to waves, but the weather's a good excuse to get back in daylight for once.*

*Evening — I'm washing plates at the mooring when I'm aware of Armand a little way along the bank. 'Um, Zhérémie, you know that place where we landed the big fish?' says a voice not quite his. 'Well ...* There's a bloody great hippo there!' *he blurts in sudden hysteria. There's sobbing in the darkness, punctuated by great, wheezing intakes of breath. 'You know the place ... that d-deep hole on the end of the island ... where we go swimming?* Oooooh ho-ho-ha-ha-haaAAAAA! He's THERE!'

*I don't know what to make of this at all. Is he on something? I return to the hut and have a word with Paul. 'Now that you mention it,' he says, 'I noticed some very large round footprints in the sand just after I landed that fish, but I didn't really think about it at the time.'*

**Day 30**

With the number of takes dropping, and the few we do we have resulting in very brief encounters, we feel it is time to move on. The fish are becoming skittish; they seem to pick up the bait, chomp it to pieces, then go. Runs — when they occur — are either abortive, or head straight for the nearest snag. Even the slightly more confident fish of The Channel have wised up. Hardly a touch, here, now. And to think I once rated goliath as a greedy dumbo, certain to be more of a problem out of the water than in it! I have a new rig, however. Three size 4 mahseer trebles, lightly nicked — one at the top, one in the middle and one just clear of the bottom — into a six-inch-long fish fillet. The advantages: instant striking of a take or pick-up, and less effort required to set a small, rather than a large, hook.

Yesterday, an occupant of the second campement told Jeremy that our new destination, downriver, is *the* place for benga — big ones, and lots of them. We're on our way! Before leaving, in the interests of fairness and community relations, we distribute fifteen yards of line and three hooks to each small boy — news has arrived that we did this for the lads of the campement of long-liners the other day. A sad-looking chief, Maurice and the friendly fisherman with the impressive muscles stand on the cliff and wave us goodbye. We tell them that we will be back in a week, and set off.

It takes us two and three quarter hours. We map the river on the way, noting fine

channel-and-sandbar water (our new obsession) and some very fishy-looking islands. The large village lies on a wide, open reach. A powerful current runs past its deep-water moorings. A crowd of youths greets us on arrival. I note the assessing, predatory look of one in their number, and immediately inform Jeremy that we are not staying. I receive an odd look. I describe the gut feeling I have about this place. 'If we stay here,' I say, with a doom-ridden finality, 'we'll have trouble.' He nods, knowing that, in fishing and travel matters, I'm not usually wrong — and when I am, make the necessary, profuse apologies. We will shop, then go.

Bernard, a teacher at the village school, engages us in conversation, and offers to show us round. Armand is more than happy to stay with the boat: the waterfront has its share of bathing belles. Bernard, a graduate from Brazzaville University, tells us that this remote posting oppresses him: there is no news — and drinking river water gives you worms. He leads our search for bread, sugar and my cigarettes. There are no shops, just a stock of this or that to be enquired after at a succession of huts. Sugar is in short supply. There is a bakery, however, and we buy bread for a week.

The only cigarettes to be found are *les jaunes* — the yellow ones, the colour of the packet of the cheap Brazza brand. The bearded, messianic face of Count Pietro Savorgnan de Brazza, the idealistic Italian who travelled under the French flag and claimed the Congo for France, looks up at me from a cigarette pack. Even in crude lithograph the man's eyes burn accusingly. Of all the foreign explorers in Africa during the nineteenth century (with the possible exception of Livingstone, who offered High Victorian salvation through Christ), de Brazza was alone in defending the interests of the African. Sadly, his altruism was out of step with the times. Corrupt and powerful interests wrested the Congo from his control, and, very soon, reports of atrocities, similar to those being committed in neighbouring Belgian territory, were received in France. There was a national outcry, and de Brazza was sent to the Congo to make a report. What he found there broke him; he died during the return journey to France. After his death in 1905, conditions in the colony improved little, and during construction of the great railway to the coast actually grew worse. Portraits of a robed, exotic-looking de Brazza — like an earlier Lawrence — still hang in government offices today, in honour of a European who did not sell out.

A lightning tour of the school and Bernard's vegetable garden yields a gift of wild honey from a colleague, and a bundle of legumes. Then we visit the chief, who lives in a hut beneath a Dan-Dare-rocket tree on the bluff above our boat. His shifty-eyed, ill-favoured look somehow confirms my damning first impression of the village. We make polite noises, then leave.

As Armand and Jeremy attack the bread and honey, I throw a plug. Soon the savage take and furious leap of a five-pound tomba returns it, further holed. The mackerel-coloured plug, which in a brief career has received five offers, has not yet landed a fish and may be retired before it does.

On the journey back, Armand is quiet at first, but rallies as his thoughts on village

girls begin to fade. Jeremy and I are pleased to have discovered that a lot of the water we've seen today is accessible from our village, but know we must be quick: since the coche journey the river has risen by more than a foot, covering a number of the exposed sandbars marked on our earlier map. Overall, we feel much better for having had a day off.

Passing a sandbar just below our village, in the dusk, we spy a lone figure. It's the chief. He has a big knife at his belt — something with which to stick an attacking hippo, he tells us. He is glad we're back.

**Day 31**

*We're anchored in the cut between sandbank and island, held by a thirty-pound rock twenty foot down, when something seizes my quarter-tomba bait. I'm almost pulled in on the strike. There is no leap. As I grope to loosen the drag the fish comes adrift. The hooks are bare. Trembling, I recast.*

*Nothing happens, the usual story now after a fish has been hooked and lost. After half an hour we opt to move down slightly, and fractionally closer to the sand. I pick up my rod but I'm snagged. We don't want to disturb the water by going down with the boat so I will have to pull from here. I reach along the line as far as I can and, with a folded handkerchief for protection, wind six or seven turns of the tight 40lb nylon round my hand. The line stretches to its limit; I grit my teeth as it bites into me, expecting at any second the dull, water-insulated* ping *of the trace-knot parting. But at close to the breaking point, the tension eases slightly; whatever I'm hooked up to has shifted. Encouraged by the thought of breaking my own world record for a rod-caught tree, I quickly apply a fresh tourniquet a bit further up. Breaking into a sweat, I start to build a slow momentum. A bird's nest of tight coils is piling up in the boat so I ask Paul to pick up my rod and wind it in. The line is adjacent to the boat now ... what, oh* WHAT! *It's cutting upstream. My hand is heaved to within millimetres of the water before I can free it, the line to the rod-tip snaps tight and the reel gives out a protesting yelp. Paul manoeuvres the rod butt into my stomach with a slightly disbelieving look. 'You've got a ginormous fish on there,' he says.*

*'It's the hippopotamus,' says Armand with a nervous snigger.*

*Fifteen minutes later we're almost inclined to believe him. I'm standing on the raised platform in the middle of the boat, two feet above the water-line, with the rod handle pointing forty-five degrees into the air (this is a rod that has cranked a ninety-pounder out of the Kaveri) — and its tip is just* one inch *from the surface. And the thing has hardly budged. Keeping the tackle locked solid, we up-anchor, fire up the motor and set an oblique course upstream, between the line of the current and the sand. The idea is to pull it into quieter water where we can play it from terra firma. We stay where we are.*

*After half an hour there's no doubt it's a fish. A hippo, despite being vegetarian, would have head-butted the canoe by now and bitten the occupants in half. I make a*

*suggestion to Paul. 'How about getting the echo-sounder transducer and pointing it at this thing. It could give us some idea what we're up against.'*

*Paul, sitting on his hands, just smiles vacantly and says nothing. Unusual for him. After a pause he says, 'You know, I'm not sure I really want to see what you've got there.'*

*'I still say it's the hippopotamus,' says another voice. The dome of the sky reverberates to the hoots of our laughter.*

*After an hour the muscles of my back are a solid, aching knot. We all know now that we'll never get this monster in. Unless we stay on this river for ever and wait for it to die of old age. I take hold of the line with my hand again. It's make or break. There's a ping like line pulling through weed, or a branch snapping. And again. The fish has taken us through a sunken tree, on what we had taken to be a clean bottom. Then the line breaks.*

*When we relate the story to the chief he quietly dismisses Armand's hippo theory, looks intently at Paul and me and nods.* 'Suni,' *he says. The Gorgon-headed* Heterobranchus*: serpentine body, armour-plated head, and a mass of tentacles that puts one in mind of a vandalized undersea communications cable. We have encountered one of the few super-heavyweights of this planet that have nothing to fear from beast or man. Huge but unseen, total master of its environment, it swims into a secure future while terrestrial giants perish. Even with our far-from-delicate tackle we had no chance. The loss is one I can accept.*

**Day 32**

I am awake at a furry-mouthed, gluey-eyed, bristly five-fifteen. I feel like a well-hacked mboga. The hut is airless and hot and no place to sleep. I go out to get water for coffee. Across the river the sky is calm and clear, and preparing itself for a big opening number when the sun appears.

As normal functioning is resumed, I watch the undoubted beauty of the village dawn — the long shadows, the golden light, the persistent lambs suckling at their mothers knelt on the sand, the river beyond.... If this was India, I would be in a fair old writing frenzy by now. But, lacking the time, I help lug gear to the boat so we can be away by six-thirty.

Today the echo-sounder proves its worth. Although a sounder is no substitute for a knowledge of your quarry, watercraft and constant watchfulness, it does help to confirm educated guesses — to reveal features in bodies of water too large or deep for human faculties to read and fully comprehend. We are developing an eye for goliath water, now; we can travel a stretch of river, and point at places and say, 'There!' Increasingly, something happens when we fish these places. A sweep with the sounder, afterwards, often reveals why.

Forty-five minutes down from the village, we find a channel sweeping from the middle of the river towards the left bank. It looks promising. There's a depth of

twenty feet in the main flow that runs towards a point on the left bank where a sandbar (actually the channel's left bank) tapers off and meets, or rather becomes, a forested shore. The flow hits this shore at an acute angle, whirls around a bit, then runs down parallel with it, smooth and deep-looking. A sign on a tree at the point of impact tells riverboats to follow the bank down. We begin at the upper end of the channel, anchoring (we have one now — a large rock, a gift from the chief) with the exposed sandbar to our left and the flow to our right, dropping down each time after fishing out a cast. The line of water along which we are anchoring begins to shallow significantly as we near the downstream end of the bar — the place where its sand meets (or becomes) the forested bank and the channel current, twenty yards below, hits that bank. As Armand pays out another few yards of anchor rope, to allow our stern to drift a little further downstream across the shallow, I watch the depth on the sounder-screen suddenly plummet from less than three, to thirty-three, feet. We are on the edge of a great drop-off. To me it seems an ideal holt for a predator: deep water offering cover and security, an adjacent shallow to attract small fish, and a fast current delivering casualties and unwary travellers on a never-ending conveyor, past the drop-off, into the hole beneath the forested bank.

I lob a bait, and allow the current to take it into the depths. The bait, a side of soso mounted on three small trebles, is scissored up so fast by a taking fish that I am unable to offer a strike. I retrieve bare hooks. It happens again minutes later. I strike, but miss clean. We agree that a saltwater-size fixed-spool reel with fast retrieve might have improved my chances. Further down, we are plagued by more bait-removals and aborted runs. Then I convert two steadier runs into a landed five-and-a-half-pound tomba and a duplicate that throws the hook with a towering leap. I think it can be safely said that neither of us is much in love with tigerfish at present.

MEMO (written same evening)

> Yesterday morning — the morning of Hippo Day — we witnessed the marked difference between net- and rod-and-line fishermen. On the days they had accompanied us, the lads from the second campement had been very quiet and had shown great watercraft. Yesterday morning, while fishing the midstream island, we were joined by a canoe-full of boys from our village, each proudly bearing his new hook and line. They bundled ashore nearby, and soon were throwing out lines fitted with rock sinkers of seldom less than a crashing eight ounces. Then, almost immediately, they retrieved them and threw again ... and again ... and again.... When boredom set in, stone- and stick-throwing and fighting broke out. As sons of netters and trappers, they lacked the quiet discretion of people who know they will only eat if they do nothing to discourage a fish from taking a baited hook. Soon the boys became a problem, following us from place to place in a splashy pirogue. My capture of a good tomba only encouraged further frantic, but useless, efforts. Fishless, they eventually set off for home. When they had gone I hooked a four-pound goliath, which fought 40lb-test line and a poker of a rod with great tenacity. Love this fish I might not, respect it I do.

**Taking stock**

*I've got to do something about my state of mind. Our results are tailing off and our limited success doesn't seem to be governed by any kind of logic, and it's doing our brains in. In normal circumstances you succeed by minimizing the part played by luck, but here it appears to be the major factor. You think you're moving forward, only to find you're going backwards. A rig change leads to a marginal increase in the hooking ratio — but only for a while, after which it's back to square one, or worse. You start to wonder if it is worth thinking at all. Then you wonder if it's even worth fishing, if all you're going to do is lose them. So far we've had twenty-five good runs, of which we've hooked just under half, of which we've landed less than half. An overall success ratio of one in five. I'm tempted to believe there is no answer: results will always be random. If so, there's no elation in success, no despair in failure. The emotions cease to be engaged.*

*There are the runs that stop the instant you engage the clutch. Are the fish telepathic? Is it coincidence? Are they just incredibly sensitive? I'm inclined to believe the latter; and they create resistance even in a resistance-free set-up by the sheer speed of their take. But what can you* do *about it?*

*Things are not helped by the pressure we're under. Our time on the river is limited. And at the end of each day we have to cook, wash, wash up and prepare tackle in the dark, enveloped by clouds of flying hypodermics. It's too much like work. We need to rest but can't afford to. A change of location could be the answer. But where?*

**Day 34**

I have just caught a goliath tigerfish of twenty-five pounds.

An hour ago we were drifting the wooded bank below the second campement. At the time, I had the events of the morning much in mind: the two-hour bait-catching farce at the head of The Channel; the take that came when we finally made a start — a take from a heavy fish which leapt wildly then swam up the current towards the boat, requiring me to wind down fast and strike a second and third time; the image of a casual wallow on the surface, just before the line fell slack. I was recalling this grisly sequence, when, eighty yards downstream, the smooth bankside flow was broken by a two-part slash — swirling smash-take instantly followed by an across-the-surface leap to regain the depths of the channel. I saw it clearly, and advised Jeremy that the fish weighed at least twenty pounds. Forty minutes later, after a brief but dazzling fight, what I am certain is the same fish (we had cast to the splash) swam past the boat. As it did so, we watched a set of wicked teeth chomping mechanically at my hooks. It seems an age ago, now, since Paul said to me, in comic cowpoke-drawl, 'That benga — the one you call goliath? — sure is a mean critter!' He was right.

On the deck, at my feet, a golden eye is glazing in death. It is not that we don't wish to return goliath — we do. But our situation and circumstances here demand

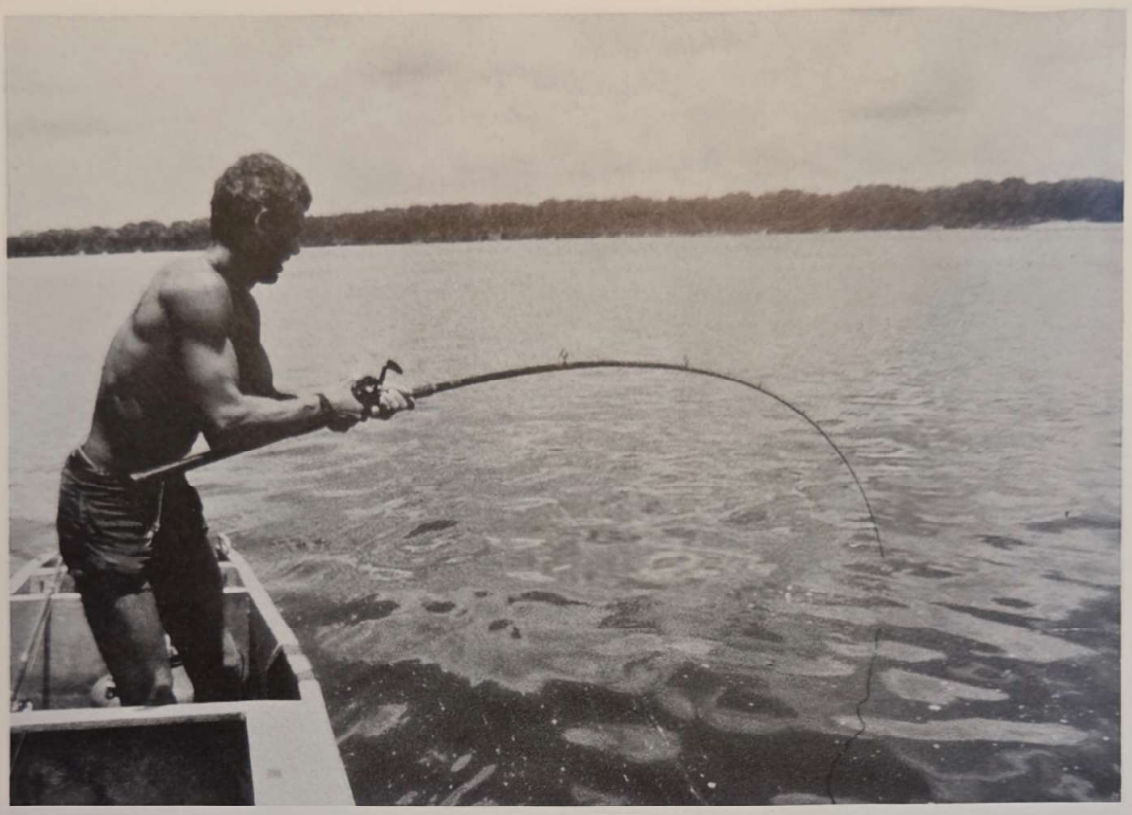
*'A metre of stainless with an alien's smile'*

that we take fish to eat and live. With few fish being caught by the village at present, for us to release such a fish is unthinkable, an action certain to offend our hosts. So we have been sharing our fish, and have received gifts of fruit and fish in return. Besides, goliath — being top dog of the watery pack, with no creature able or willing to catch him — is prolific here; he can withstand modest predation.

Before this magnificent creature's colours fade, I record them in my notebook: the jade green of the back shading into steel blue on the upper flank; the latex-like, royal-blue adipose fin with its black leading edge; the belly of unblemished white; the fins of silver grey tinged with coral.... And a detail of a blade-runner's head: the starburst of grooves on the armoured gill-flap, chisel-chased and inlaid with silver and gold.

Burnt-nosed and grinning, I lift it: a metre of stainless with an alien's smile. The camera shutter snaps.

Mellowed by a plate of fried benga, a litre of palm wine and a lucid but legless fatigue, I sit on a simple bench among the fine trees above the river — the place at which, during the day, the chief and the other men sit and make traps and



*Tackle that has subdued Kaveri mahseer to 90lb-plus is severely tested by a 15¾lb goliath, as it sounds towards sunken trees beneath the boat*

conversation. A six-foot *tam-tam* drum, hollowed from a log, rests against a nearby tree. It's the drum which thundered out at the village hop the other night, and set all the children dancing. I remember, now, V.S. Naipaul's damnation of Zaire, in his book *A Bend in the River.* He called it 'a place unsupported by history' — or words to that effect. But he was wrong, I think — both about Zaire, and this, its neighbour. For I know that I am sitting in a place of great antiquity; where, for hundreds of years, men have kept a look-out for war canoes coming from up- or downriver, council has been held, decisions made and the chief's justice handed down. Though this region cannot boast once great empires and impressive ruins, it has a long history of village civilization, nevertheless.

**Day 35**

We are on some fabulous water this morning: the wooded islands we noted during our attempted village move. The head of each is a tackle graveyard, no place to leger a bait, but, judging from some hefty swirls in the current above, a preferred home of goliath. We beach the boat on a sandbar to the right of the right-hand island, get Armand fishing for bait in a backwater (where he stands on newly made crocodile tracks) and the stove on for breakfast. I can even face porridge this morning. Leaving Jeremy with the stove, I wade a sandy shallow (keeping an eye out for a lurking croc), and throw a plug towards the near island-head. I pay out line

to the big floating Timber Rattler, to increase the length of my cast by thirty yards, then snap the pick-up to, and begin the retrieve. A goliath of about twelve pounds hits the plug, and instantly discards it with a cartwheeling leap.

After breakfast, we fish the deep channel that runs between the islands. We tie up to branches extending from tree skeletons lying on the riverbed; their ribs are visible below. This is a frightening place, but a damn good one. Our baits lie at the edge of the timber. Then a storm sweeps in from the north-east, and we cast off and run before it, reaching a campement just in time, narrowly missing certain wipe-out. Those waves, Armand says, would have sunk the largest dug-out; we are thankful for the *Water Dog*.

**Day 36 / The Big Bweta**

*We first heard about this place four days ago from a fisherman at a campement downstream. His animated state prompted an immediate recce: we doubled round the tapering island-tail opposite and continued up into unknown water. Even at a distance the place was intimidating: a towering cliff of dark sand and the water's surface visibly and audibly buckling. No doubt that here was the focus of hidden forces. As we drew nearer, we saw the force lines: a deep surge hard against the island was deflected by a huge scoop in the bank out into midstream, where it met almost head-on the sandbar-funnelled outlet from a vast prairie of water that stretched all the way to the opposite bank and several miles upstream. A fallen tree, with its raft of captive flotsam, reached from the cliff base towards the meeting point, whisking the waters to a foam.*

*Now we approach from upstream. The island we doubled behind, it turns out, is the same several-mile-long land mass whose shrubby head is opposite the village. It is, however, fissured with narrow, winding, reedy channels; we short-cut through these.*

*We get side-tracked, briefly mooring along the deep, fast, snaggy bank several hundred yards above our destination. At about eleven, I have a stop-start run — quite possibly a fish moving upstream and taking the too-light running lead with it (lead shortage is starting to be a problem). I strike, feel nothing, wind like crazy, striking repeatedly ... yes, there's something there. Thirty yards away a six-pound goliath leaps and returns the hooks. A bit further down, Paul momentarily hooks something. We're certainly developing a feel for finding the fish — even if we can't hook them. Then we both snag comprehensively. Time to move. We're late for our appointment.*

*The only way to fish the main surge is to gun the boat onto a clump of floating reed at the extremity of the fallen tree. At a guess, we're midway between the top of the cliff and the riverbed, an overall drop of about eighty feet. (Unfortunately we can't confirm the depth as the echo-sounder batteries have died.) I send a knot of fish gore, weighted by four ounces of lead, on a journey of discovery. Gravity and current fight over the offering, spinning perhaps seventy yards from my spool before I think I feel a bump. But as soon as the line is restrained, the current hoists everything aloft. Even with double the weight we can't tell whether the baits are on the bottom or waving in*

*midwater. But it's irrelevant: we both agree this is not goliath water — big catfish maybe, but goliath will be on the shoulder of the deep, where there's better visibility.*

*We move to the base of the cliff, slightly downstream, and punch out long casts. The lines swing round in the current then cut down, down, down until they hang almost perpendicular. Again it doesn't feel right. The baits are in deep, dark, dead water. We wait nonetheless; we know by now that if goliath is present, he generally makes this known within half an hour. An uneventful hour passes. We go to the low sandbar on the other side of the flow, just down from the whirlpool-like back-eddy, with the same result. 'It's sod's law,' says Paul. 'Yesterday we have good water but impossible weather. Now we've got the weather but the water's duff.'*

*We decide our limited time would be more profitably spent blasting up to where Paul had his twenty-five-pounder (and where I previously had an acrobatic thirteen-pounder). But on arrival we're ambushed by the hated black flies. Soon, the only respite from self-flagellation with a damp T-shirt is when we break off to slap each other. Enough.*

*Back at the village it's a special night. It's nearly a full moon and the kids are beating hell out of a tom-tom that's taller than I am (they have to stand on a chair to play it). We join them for a while, then retire to sleep, exhausted, to the pulse of the vibrating air.*

A 'lie-in' till seven this morning! I am feeling bored and listless, and disinclined to fish. I am fast losing enthusiasm for a quarry that's just not doing the business — merely going though the motions, mouthing at baits. Where is all the crash-bang-wallop action we were promised? And with water conditions deteriorating daily now, this situation won't improve.

The first part of the morning is spent repairing ourselves and our tackle. We agree that we have been fishing for too long without a break, and are lacking motivation; that the fish here have had a good pasting, and are now wary; and that perhaps it is time to return to the town, reprovision, then try new waters upstream. We agree to give today our best.

As if to contradict my gloomy pronouncements, several goliath noisily chew up water off the head of the island opposite the village. After catching some bait, we try for them. Our anchor rope is too short to hold us in the deep, fast current above the taking area, and we drift through it, ignominiously dragging anchor. By two-thirty I have had enough, and ask to be dropped off at the village; Jeremy and Armand return to The Channel.

Sitting outside the hut, waiting for the tea water to boil, I experience powerful feelings of relief and well-being. It's good to have five minutes to myself, to just sit and flop. The chief's wife is sat, preparing manioc, outside their number-two hut a few yards away; we exchange smiles. The other day, Armand told me that she envies me my head of hair, but is worried about my earring: here, only women and wide-

boys wear earrings. 'So what's new?' Jeremy had said. He had to duck when I next swung in a lead.

Then a game of peep-bo develops, between the chief's tiny daughter and me. When Jeremy patched up her badly cut finger a few days ago, it took all her father's and Armand's strength to hold the shrieking three-year-old still. Since then, on catching sight of us, she has run screaming into her parents' hut. This afternoon she peeps at me from behind a tree close to her mother; I grin back and give a little wave; at length, she returns it.

The chief stands beneath a tree at the cliff edge thirty yards away. He is stripping creepers of their bark, preparing them for weaving into traps. Behind him, two hundred yards away, I can see our small silver boat at anchor on the sunlit strip of The Channel. Jeremy is hard at work, trying to break his duck of several days. A hen and her chicks come and peck at my feet, pulling my focus back to the foreground. I scatter biscuit crumbs.

I can feel it coming — one of those moments when you know in your very being that life is not just a search for acquisition, reproduction, status and a not-too-messy death. This place, like a few before it, is giving me strong intimations of the commonality of human experience — of how life is the same, whoever you are, wherever you may be. We all travel the same road, to the same destination; some just have an easier time getting there. Suddenly, I feel very strongly for this village — as I do for rural India, Iceland and the area of Wales I left nearly a year ago. I feel oddly proprietorial about these places, willing to fight in their defence. Tired and emotional and tea in hand, I'm going to make a resolve: that the scene before me now, in a lowly village in the ass-end of nowhere, is not going to become a view through a lodge window for weary goliath-hunters at the end of the day. Nor will the chief and the other fishermen become guides; the young men, cocktail waiters; and the women, chambermaids ... or worse. No, I could not live with the knowledge that we — Jerry and me — were the catalysts of change here — for good or for ill. Our story, if it is told, will be told through a glass, darkly. There will be no 'X marks the spot'.

**Day 38**

*Wake to drizzle, which increases then eases. Not sure what this does to our proposed long hike downstream ... Plan B, whatever that is. No sound from the hut. I secretly hope we'll give fishing a miss.*

*I reflect on yesterday's efforts. Paul had returned to the village at three, leaving me to prospect some of the unexplored bits of the gap out front. The water did some unexpected things, both depth- and current-wise. For the first time in days I found myself fishing with confidence, and I dropped in on fish immediately. (It definitely seems the case that 'flesh out' baits are more appealing than 'skin out' — the distinction Celestin made last year between 'dead fish' and 'food'.) But the takes, though fast, were nervous — even with the rod pointing down the line and the reel on*

Goliath's dentition is even more diabolical than meets the eye, as this radiograph shows. A full set of reserve teeth lies concealed — points backward — in a canal within the jaw. (2x life size; note missing tooth towards front of jaw)

*free-spool (given the merest brush with the thumb to prevent overrun). I struck, and missed, three times. The fish here are definitely wise to us, even in water we've previously left untouched.*

*At length, Paul and Armand stir. By unspoken agreement, we abandon any idea of an outing this morning. For the first time in over two weeks we do a proper tour of the village. We see the long-deserted hut, almost swallowed by its shrub fence, that was once the pharmacy; and the airy, brick-built school. A blackboard depicts the human circulatory system and the three-times-table. Lingala graffiti decorate the walls. A rickety shack nearby is, we're told, for the older children. (Which is strange; children in their teens are conspicuously absent from the village.) Then we talk with some men who are building a hut. If all the materials are ready, they tell us, they can put it up inside a week.*

*At the downstream extremity of the village we drop in on my namesake, an ever-cheery, bearded man, who often passes our hut early in the morning, shouldering his axe, on the way to clear his small manioc plantation. Jerome is making fishing baskets today. I ask how many are normally set by one person.*

*'That depends how strong you are,' he replies in his deep, musical voice (in good French, I register with some surprise). 'Maybe thirty or forty, maybe just ten or fifteen.'*

*'Or three,' interjects Armand with mock seriousness, looking around him.*

*What limits trap numbers, we learn, is the difficulty of collecting vines from the*

*forest. 'You have to make new baskets every year because fish can break out of old ones,' Jerome explains. 'You set them in the bankside weeds when the water starts to rise, and they produce well throughout high water: usually big carpe. You check them each day and smoke what you can't eat. Then you sell to a riverboat trader or take them to Brazzaville yourself.'*

*Towards the end of a long conversation comes the explanation for Jerome's French. Having studied engineering for two years in Moscow, he used to work for the riverboat company in Brazzaville, purchasing materials from Europe for the manufacture of barges. His manioc plantation, he says, is progressing well. He's finished clearing, and is waiting three or four days for the scrub to dry before firing it. Then he'll dig the ashes into the ground, wait for rain, and plant. After a few cycles of two years cultivation two years fallow, the clearing will be left. Then by all accounts, unlike its counterpart in South America, the jungle will reclaim it.*

*Back at our hut we make a spontaneous decision. It's time to leave. We need new interest. Perhaps we'll find it up one of the small black-water sub-tributaries that we keep hearing about. The decision brings relief. Paul and I chuckle as we confess to identical reactions to the rain this morning. Apparently while I had been cocking a guilty ear to the outside world (instead of springing up to rouse the others), and hoping that nobody else was about to make a move, Paul had been doing exactly the same.*

* * *

*Bad news (but not unexpected) as we pass through the town. There's only an outside chance of flying back to Brazzaville when we'd planned. As far as anybody knows, the Twin Otter is still minus an engine.*

*And Bill is adamant that there are no tigerfish of any description in the smaller tributaries. So we'll stay on the main branch. There are conflicting stories as to what villages lie upstream and how far away they are. We select our destination on the basis of that well-tried combination: rumour and wishful thinking.*

* * *

*To save time we part company from the winding navigation channel, only rejoining it on its infrequent returns to the near bank. Only once do we run out of depth, briefly having to retrace our steps and detour, round reedy sand, into midriver. After dodging rain all day (we've seen it ahead, behind, to left and right) we briefly get caught. We tuck under trees, against rock, alongside some very fast, deep, hostile water.*

*It gets dark. The moon is almost full, but wrapped in cloud. The engine note suddenly changes, and a second later we hit sand. Our wake, overtaking us, forms breakers on unseen shallows straight ahead and to our right; but their absence to our*

*left indicates deeper water there. We push clear and nose into a backwater. Armand instructs me to sound with the paddle. After an awkward start I relax into a rhythm: swing it forward one-handed, push down (blade parallel to boat) as it rushes back alongside me, then lift. Mostly I feel nothing, my hand descending to the surface unresisted. When I feel and hear the gritty danger-signal I run my free hand down the paddle shaft to mark the depth and show this to Armand. (He can see me now; the moon sweeps anticlockwise through clear sky.) When there's less than three feet of water Armand throttles back and I increase the sounding frequency. In places the sand rises to within six inches of the hull; a burbling* waah-wah-wah *comes from the tilted motor as the part-exposed blades mix water with air. We hold our breath to lighten the boat until the sand retreats. In this way we cover several miles — but only two-thirds the distance taken by the channel.*

*Huts appear floating above us on the end of my dim torch-beam. The village is tiny, just a handful of people. We are matter-of-factly installed inside a solid, tin-roofed hut. A pile of sacks indicates that they grow cocoa here. Nobody fishes. Perhaps this is something to do with the abundant insect life. A voice comes through the thickly humming air from the direction of Armand's net. 'Can you hear that? Nobody told me there was a sawmill here.'*

**Day 40**

The contrariness of goliath is much to be admired. Fishing from a sandy island just up from the village, and with everything quiet, I decide to have a shave. As I lather my hands, the reel screams. Unable to grab the rod, I watch a six-pounder reach for the sky many yards away.

Crossing the river to the point where a bankside current cuts diagonally across the bed towards the place we have just been, we find a great scar on the bank (made by a falling tree) and a deep hole. We fish here, casting baits into the current running out and away from us. Jeremy catches a near-sixteen-pounder that really puts a bend in his rod. When we return to the village, someone says, 'Did you see the hippo?' We reply in the negative. It appears that we have fished two of a local hippo's favourite hang-outs.

After one more mosquito-filled night, we leave in search of the better water we saw on the way up. We buy bread in a large village, then take a trip up an entering tributary. The water is cool, dark as ale, and clear. The river runs through dense forest; its waters are stained with the tannins and phenols from decaying vegetation. Many catfish here, we're told, the big ones having a preference for soap. Lifebuoy perhaps? An hour is enough. This stream, we somehow feel, does not hold goliath. We regain the warmer, more opaque waters of the larger river, and head downstream.

Happily, our chosen water lies close to a campement occupied by one of Armand's uncles. We are made most welcome. I am given a small rush hut; Armand

*If goliath fails to disconnect itself on its first leap, the angler's chances jump from non-existent to marginal*

will share it with me. Jeremy has his tent. Jean-Bernard, the uncle, decides that there's chicken for dinner, and hands his nephew a harpoon. An unsuspecting hen meets a sudden end in the bushes. This tiny campement, so simple and clean, soon feels like home. I sleep well.

In the morning we fish the opposite shore. Here, a flow is deflected by a rocky spur. Jean-Bernard tells us that fish swim the new line of current, and, further down, close to the forest itself. In low water, he says, when the river is almost two metres lower than it is now, the benga go crazy. I fish the morning for one leaping tiddler; Jeremy's bait goes undisturbed. On our return, Jean-Bernard tell us that, unfortunately, we are fishing at the wrong time of year — the benga are just not eating now. If conditions were right, he would be fishing, too. I'm inclined to think that we should give it a few more days, then go. We have had our fishing for this year.

*Afternoon — On our journey upstream I gave up comprehensively mapping the river; most of what we travelled through was uninteresting backwater. However, we did pass a handful of interesting spots, whose location I noted. One of these is just a short way upstream: a rock point creating a long tongue of turbulence adjacent to a steep bank of sand. A large area of water seems to conform to what we now recognize as the ideal configuration: on the edge of powerful current, deep but not too deep, and — crucially — a sandy bottom.*

*We arc upstream and drift down to the point, where we tie to a tangle of dead wood. The end of a liana, inconspicuously knotted to a branch just below the surface, confirms our hunch: a fixed line for goliath. But when I gently pull, it's clear no line is attached. Was it removed by man or fish?*

*As suspected, the riverbed in front of us is clean. Paul has an immediate take, but makes only fleeting contact. Just a minute later I connect to something solid. There's no leap, but something strong wrenches line from a grudging reel before turning and running towards me. I wind frantically ... and bring in the hooks and the remainder of the bait. I wonder if soso is perhaps too tough a bait (even though it was de-finned and de-scaled): maybe it impedes hook penetration. Considering this incident in isolation, it seems a possibility; but on other occasions baits comprehensively bound with copper wire have been instantaneously removed. No, it's just another example of our quarry's perversity.*

*Having used up our chances at this place, we move upstream to some deep, fast water running hard against a snaggy bank. But we feel it's too fast. And there is no edge to the flow; it continues all the way out to midriver. We have no takes. We drop down to just below the bweta, but can't find the scoured channel that ought to be there, that would tend to concentrate the fish. The water is surprisingly and uniformly shallow: only about twelve foot.*

*We continue down to a narrows about 250 yards across, between a high-banked*

*Only a minority of goliath hooked come safely to the boat*

*island and the low-lying continuation of the sand below the bweta. Two parallel white boards nailed to a tree near the head of the island indicate that the riverboat channel runs down the middle of this gap. We anchor about eighty yards up from the marker, forty yards from the island bank, in twenty feet of water. The idea (though it's unavoidably a bit hit-or-miss) is to drop baits at the edge of the deepest water.*

*I feel something fiddling with the bait. I flick off the ratchet and a finicky run develops. On striking I don't feel very much, but when I wind down there's solid resistance: something very heavy moving slowly upstream. We lift the anchor and follow, edging to the sandbar side (there are fallen trees along the island). We have all realized what it is. Armand's control of the boat is, as ever, faultless. This is particularly commendable as his eyes are closed and his body is quaking. 'Ohhh, Mr hippo specialist!' he quietly moans.*

*Quite unexpectedly the creature rises in the water. I drop the rod-point and wind, but the pull is still so strong that, though the reel handle turns, the spool doesn't. By the time I've tightened the drag-nut in response, the fish has sunk back down and reattached to the bottom — I've lost my chance to take the initiative. (With a quick-action lever-drag I might have held it, but as yet all the most desirable features do not come in a single piece of machinery.) I instruct Armand to motor into position directly overhead. At least this character is moving more than the first catfish; there might be a chance of tiring it out — but not if we pussyfoot around. In an effort to prise its head off the bottom I heave with the full strength of the tackle.* Twang! *— the hooks pull out. Sod's law.*

*Back at the campement the verdict is a big kamba. I ask how big is big. Jean-Bernard holds his hands nearly a yard apart. This is the width of the head — a convention that has arisen, presumably, because of the impossibility, with large fish, of head-to-tail indications. Asking how many kilos that is would be meaningless, because they don't have the means to weigh fish here. (Ideas of weight are consequently very vague, if not non-existent.) So I ask if two people could lift a fish that size. Heads shake emphatically. Three? Jean-Bernard looks at Costo. Costo frowns and slowly raises a hand. 'Maybe five people,' he says, looking doubtful. Paul and I let out synchronized Congolese squeals.*

*Throughout our exchange it has been clear that Jean-Bernard is itching to examine the tackle we were using. He approves of our hooks and wire but looks dismissively at the 40lb nylon. So I set the clutch on the reel, give him the rod and tell him to hold on tight, keeping the tip high. Wrapping the free end of the line round my hand (having removed the trace) I sprint the zig-zag path between the manioc plants to the far end of the clearing. Paul then instructs him how to pump me back. I return, slightly breathless, to a conclave of wide grins. Jean-Bernard hands back the rod with a nod of complete comprehension.*

*Now it's his turn to show us something. He peels off and reappears with a slightly curved, five-foot length of whittled wood the thickness of an arm. 'Now that's what I call a stick-float,' says Paul. The line, Jean-Bernard indicates, is attached round a*

*notch near one end; so when a fish moves off with the bait, the float stands up. The fisherman then paddles out and tries to pull in the line. If the fish is too strong, he lets go and tries again later. From their manner there's no doubt that these people know what they're talking about; but more remarkable is their obvious enthusiasm for what is a no-choice way of life. We judge the time right to ask about goliath: just how big do they grow? Their answer makes our flesh creep: a foot and a half across the head and 'two metres' long.*

**Day 43**

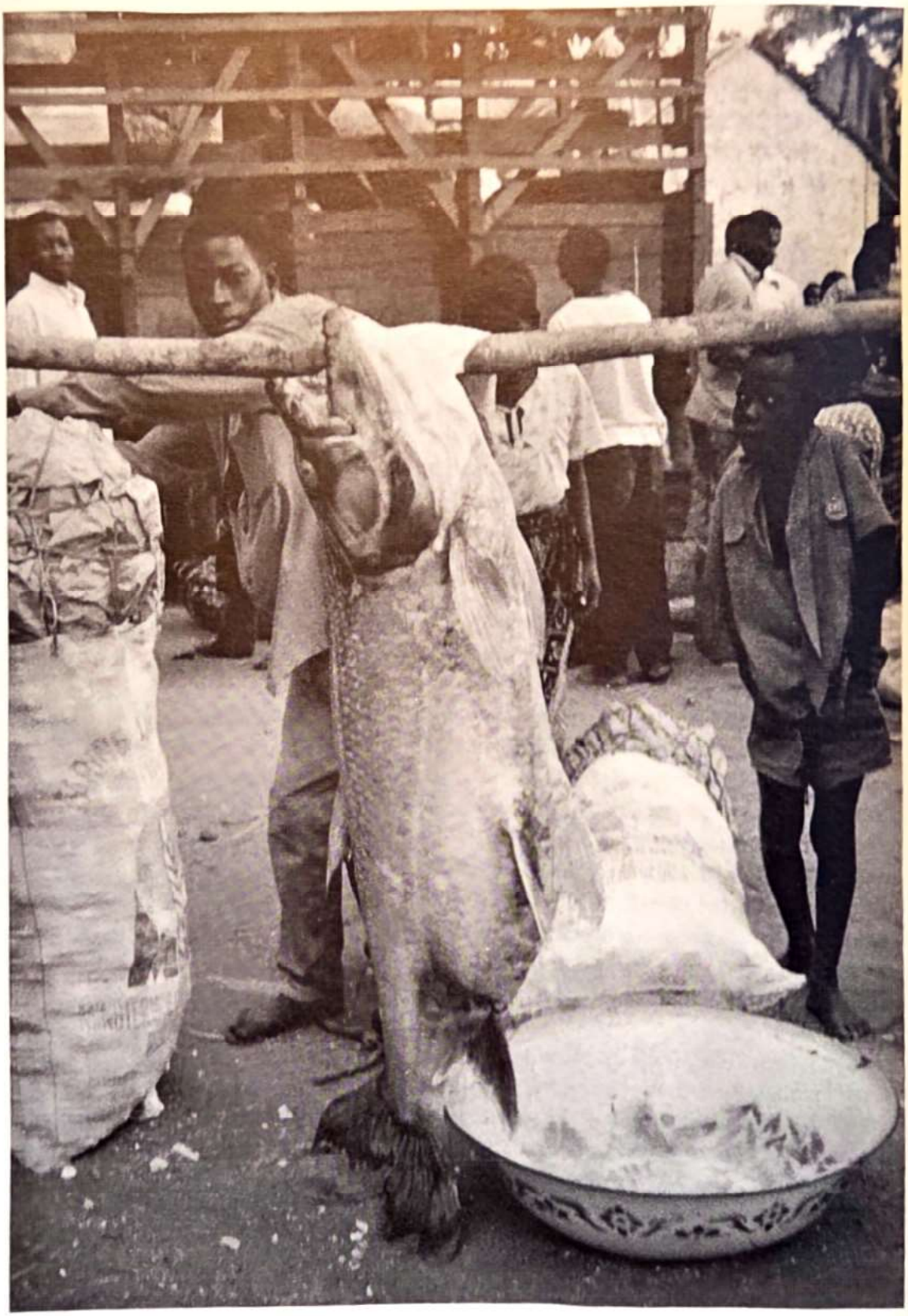
After Jean-Bernard's outsize catfish-float, not to be outdone, thin-as-a-stick Marcel appears this afternoon with a goliath handline. I can see at a glance that he knows his stuff. I despair when I read self-styled experts in the angling press making announcements like, 'The locals fish with very crude tackle,' (inferring, I take it, that they do not). Crude in terms of materials — yes, on account of availability; crude in design and efficacy — most certainly not. An angler from a developed country would starve here; of course, a good one would starve later rather than sooner; but starve he would, while these men ate. Jeremy invites Marcel to show us the tackle. I look on, and discreetly take photographs. What I hear next, lifts my scalp.

The terminal-tackle is attached to no more than fifteen yards of 90lb-test nylon on a wooden winder. It comprises a twelve-inch length of soft cord, to one end of which is whip-knotted the line and, to the other, four strands of wire taken from a moped brake cable terminating in a sharp, size 10/0 hook. A small piece of sheet lead is folded onto the cord above the wire. The tackle is altogether more sophisticated and better turned out than Maurice's museum piece. Goliath are fished for from a pirogue or from the bank, at point blank range. Jeremy asks Marcel what happens when a fish eats the bait. Marcel grabs an imaginary line in both hands, and yanks it back repeatedly, crying, *'Eh! Eh! Ehh!'* A hooked fish is held, come what may. 'They jump! They jump!' he says. (I bet they do!) 'Very big fish' are caught this way, and will often drag a canoe far across the river (like the old whalers' Nantucket Sleighride). I imagine a freshly hooked fish coming roaring up out of the water a few feet from a canoe. Jeremy and I give each other hard-eyed looks: the man is telling the truth.

**Day 44 / Last fishing day**

*Marcel is coming with us to show us a few places. For some reason we descend via the village proper, where Armand exchanges a few shouts with somebody before we continue. At a fallen tree Paul rapidly catches a dozen or so good-sized bomaka. While he's doing so, Armand mutters to me about the village, from which, it seems, the people of the fishing camp are virtual outcasts. 'The village people are dangerous,' he says. 'They have shut away the fish with their magic. If we want to catch any, we must see the chief at midday, and he will arrange it.'*

*Some previous incidents click into place. I recall Armand's earlier, tentative*



*Rendezvous missed* *(see page 252)*

*suggestions that we call in on the chief. I register for the first time that, despite favourable conditions, the fishermen we are staying with are not fishing. (How could such an obviously strange thing not have struck me before?) Then there was this morning's queer episode. An old crone, wearing a black, brightly embroidered dress, beneath which were visible ritual striations in the skin of her chest, brought us a bowl of bananas. The price was too high so we didn't buy any. When Marcel then approached and asked for one, he was told to pay. 'But how can I get money when you have locked up the fish?' he replied. She chuckled and said that's true, her husband was the 'owner' of the bweta opposite, and it was he who decided who caught fish and who didn't.*

*All of which presents a dilemma: I would visit the man for the sake of satisfying Armand, but agree with Paul that we shouldn't humour some miserable bastard who is giving our hosts so much grief. (What a contrast to the fine, hard-working man at our first village, whose humble and benign exercise of power was beyond corruption.) The best thing we could do for the campement families is clobber a big fish without any by-your-leave and casually make the fact public. Merely by being believed, the chief's mumbo-jumbo possesses real power. (It also preys on an inherent susceptibility: unlike the indigenous pygmies, these people of riverside village and campement are descended from comparatively recent, reluctant migrants, and still regard the forest as alien and threatening, the home of strange forces.) But time is running out. And goliath is contrary enough without the help of any self-styled sorcerer.*

*Marcel takes us up a quiet backwater, not a spot we would have chosen ourselves — the water is hardly moving. We are surprised by a goliath of between six and eight pounds that seizes Paul's bait and comes in like a jack-in-the-box before spitting out the hooks right next to the boat. Marcel says that goliath always swim two-by-two ('man and wife'): hook one and you won't hook another. So we continue up the creek. The water is very shallow; Marcel suddenly seems confused, and the confusion is infectious. Does he really know this place? Is he just taking the opportunity of some motorized prospecting away from his normal home territory? Or is he diverting us away from the real hotspots? We turn back to where the creek enters the main river. It looks promising but Paul and I elicit no interest. Marcel, however, has his line bitten through. Just nylon comes back; everything else is gone. There was no take, as such, from what I can discern. A very strange morning.*

*When we go back past the village the chief is not there. Difficulty solved. I suggest we continue to the hippo place but Armand is firm. 'No, we go where the old man says.' I defer. After trying unsuccessfully in what Paul and I agree are likely goliath spots, we do in fact end up very close to the hippo place. But all is quiet. We return to the campement.*

*After dark we take our full stomachs to the beached boat, from where we watch an impressive electric storm in the west. I follow Paul up to camp at ten-thirty. From Marcel's hut there come animated voices. 'It's nzambe (God) who has done it,' his*

*wife is saying. 'When he wants to return the water to the river, what can those village people do about it? Can they say, "This is our place — leave it as it is."? No, of course they can't.'*

*The storm draws close but passes us by.*

* * *

We think that a 218-yard spool of 70lb-test Drennan Sea Line, the strongest we have with us, is the best leaving present we can give our hosts. Two very happy men soon have its entire length stretched along the beach, having run out of space to divide it equally in front of the huts.

After many handshakes and thanks and promises of 'we'll be back,' we leave them, waving, on the beach. We turn downstream, and look back and wave until a bend in the river obscures them from our view. After a few minutes, we draw level with the village on the opposite bank. Armand suggests that we stop, and pay our respects to the chief. Something in me snaps, and I'm snarling, 'No! Let's leave the old fart to his fish! We'll stop by with a brace of fifty-pounders another time. As if life wasn't tough enough here, without people playing power games!' We carry on down.

* * *

We stop on a sandbar a few miles above the town and, as with the boat earlier, give ourselves and our clothes a good scrubbing down. As we wash, tiny fish nip with sharp teeth at the scabs of scratches on our legs. Jeremy remarks that it really is dog eat dog, here. I laugh like a drain. Then I wonder why, and realize that it's over, that we're done: we have caught goliath, and have a bag of fly-blown skulls to prove it. We sit on the sand beneath the midday sun, dibbling toes in the water, weaving fantasies about beer, bread and butter, long lie-ins in soft beds, and home. Home ... what a strange prospect. But I think both of us realize now, that, after all this — for a time at least — there is nowhere else to go.

## Afterword

Paul Boote

Almost a year later, struggling to make an end with the book, I visited an old friend, a dedicated and highly skilled angler. On meeting, we agreed to place a taboo on all shop talk, but, inevitably, the conversation soon got round to fishing — to the still-unfinished book (a very sore point), and then to India. He asked me how I viewed the recent scramble among our peers to get over there and catch mahseer. I found myself bleakly quoting the great travel writer, Colin Thubron: 'As for myself, as soon as a place adapts to me, I lose interest in it: it has obliterated itself.'

My friend, knowing me quite well, gave me a doubtful look, then — after what I felt was an assessing silence — said, 'I really envy you, Paul.'

'Envy *me?*' I replied with moderating hilarity. 'What have I got — except a pile of well-used fishing tackle and some memories? Come off it!'

'Exactly. I'd *kill* for your memories!' We laughed, and drank our tea.

On the journey home, I reflected on his words. And I remembered some of my own — words I had spoken, at the age of nineteen, one stormy autumn night, to Gordon Edwards, in the magical tackle- and gun-room of his home on a Welsh cliff top. Gordon was recalling some of his days on the Royalty Fishery during the 1930s and '40s. I heard about the day he landed a thirty-two-and-a-half-pound salmon from the Parlour with the Wallis rod and Aerial reel that were hanging on the wall above me now; and, how, lacking the funds then (as a young actor) to afford a salmon permit, he had diced the fish up and put it down his waders. Mr Haytor, the very correct and formidable head bailiff, never found out. During a lull in the reminiscences, I complained to Gordon that I could never have memories like his, that he was lucky to have fished great waters in their heyday, and what could I hope for in 1972?

He raked me with the grimace that he sometimes used for a smile, and said, 'My dear boy, with the utmost respect I have to say that you are talking a load of rubbish! We *are* what we remember. If there is one constant thing about the human race, it is that we *remember*. Without memories we are *nothing!* So when I hear a young man like you talking a lot of tripe about there being nothing left to fish for — and, I suspect, no woman left worth ... shall we say ... *making love* to — I tell him to get out there and make memories for himself! I am sixty, Paul, and am still discovering. Ye Gods! When I think that you caught two salmon last week, and of how other men — myself included — look at your girl! Now shut up, or go home.'

I suspected then, and I believe now, that memories *are* the key. They should not be made in a casual absence of mind, then left abandoned in time, like a youthful record collection — all golden ones before, and leaden thereafter — but be actively pursued and cultivated. Untold experiences await us all, around the next bend; we only have to be there to meet them.